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Studies that document white teachers struggling to see whiteness and minimizing the impact of race on the quality of education are plentiful in the research literature. Much is known about white educators who activate and rely on defenses such as resistance, fragility, colorblindness, or innocent ignorance to avoid or silence conversations about race at school. Less is understood about mindful white educators, critical pedagogues, who work to disrupt whiteness and thoughtfully engage young children in explicit race talk. This study was designed to examine and better understand mindful white teachers' ability to comprehend the significance of race and its impact on learning, as well as investigate factors that contribute to their sustained efforts to engage in equitable practices within one of the most inhibited and silent spaces for race talk, the elementary school classroom.

To explore white elementary teachers navigating race, I collected data for this qualitative study through semi-structured interviews and reflective member-check interviews with three white elementary school teachers who work in a district committed to anti-racism and culturally responsive pedagogy. I drew on whiteness studies, critical race theory, and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy as theoretical lenses to guide interpretation and analysis of interview data and to fully examine 1) how lived experiences shape teachers' racial consciousness, 2) ways that race issues emerge and play out in an elementary school setting, and 3) strategies mindful white teachers employ to disrupt whiteness and negotiate tensions. I used the method of portraiture to capture the experiences of these three teachers.

Even though mindful white educators navigate race in a variety of ways, this study revealed some common methods. First, mindful white teachers are willing to engage in critical self-reflection and write new racial scripts. Second, they respond to these new scripts by challenging the traditional canon and incorporating instructional practices that allow all students to see themselves in the curriculum, the school, and the world. Race is not a taboo topic in their classroom. These findings indicate a need to continue research on mindful white teachers like the ones in this study. We can learn much more about how to improve education by examining their motivations and successes, as well as their blindspots and struggles, than if we continue to remain overly focused on resistant white teachers and their failures. Lastly, all three teachers indicate that supportive school context plays a major role in their confidence and motivation to tackle the messiness of race talk. Contexts shape how we think, what we say, and what we do, which points to a need to further investigate school environments that actively support equity efforts.

WHITE TEACHERS NAVIGATING RACE IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS:

PORTRAITS OF POSSIBILITY

by

Kimberly P. Mellor

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

Public schools are positioned to provide a democratic location for students and teachers, from various lived experiences and backgrounds, to construct knowledge together. Schools are usually the first public places where individuals have to work alongside others, outside the familiar and private bounds of family and immediate community. Teachers widely recognize relationship-building and healthy classroom communities as essential parts of teaching and learning, and many contend that classroom conversations and interactions can stimulate healthy discussions about academic, civic, and social content. A democratic environment, one that reflects democratic ideals - opens its doors to everyone, embraces diversity, and strives for common good - does not spontaneously appear within a school; it is carefully cultivated through the leadership and guidance of the educators in the building. Most administrators and teachers believe they create democratic, inclusive, positive environments for ALL students, however racial disparities in achievement tell a different story (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015; Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006). While school buildings across America are filled with good intentions, many well-intentioned educators are unconsciously impeding the academic and social contributions of some students by cultivating communities of silence around issues of race and racism.

I am an experienced, white, female educator. The majority of my twenty years of service has been devoted to young children and educators at the elementary level

through my professional roles of classroom teacher and instructional coach, but I also spent several years teaching adult literacy and General Education Diploma classes at a community college. Many notable things have changed over the course of my career: teaching methods, the integration of technology in the classroom, the narrowing of curriculum to fit testing demands, and the emphasis on test scores, to name a few. Despite various changes and educational "reforms," I have witnessed several unrelenting, disturbing constants within the educational landscape. My accounts reflect, of course, my personal experiences within white majority suburban elementary schools as well as one community college, and thus provide a limited view. I recognize that I am but one teacher amidst many, living in one region of the country, but data from the National Center for Education Statistics and other bodies of research reinforce a troubling national trend: significant gaps in achievement as well as gaps in the *quality* of education between students of color and white students endure. Nationally, students of color are: (1) overidentified for special education, (2) underidentified for gifted education, (3) less likely to be enrolled in advanced, college preparation classes, (4) suspended at disproportionately higher rates than white students, and (5) have lower graduation rates at both high school and college levels (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015; DiAngelo, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Musu-Gillette, et al., 2017). One possible explanation for such disparities points to race and cultural mismatch in schools. Mostly white, middle class educators teach a student population that is now majority non-white and whose numbers continue to increase. This demographic data makes it imperative to take a closer look at the presence of whiteness in schools, including how white teachers navigate race in their classrooms.

Problem Statement

Most scholars agree that racial socialization largely happens in the home, but schools communicate messages about race too (Nash & Miller, 2015). Schools are interesting sites to consider when examining racial socialization, because young students spend a disproportionate amount of time there. Unfortunately, through a dynamic interplay between students and teachers, their contexts, and the institution of school, public schools often send students problematic messages about race (Chapman, 2014; Michael & Bartoli, 2014; Yoon, 2012). We should be concerned that public school culture facilitates, or contributes to, the marginalization of students of color and threatens relationship-building, leading many students to feel disconnected and disengaged. "Although it has long been a stated goal in the United States that all youngsters, regardless of family background, should benefit from their education, many students have not" (Nieto, 2000, p. 180). This is a problem we need to address. A related problem, and the primary one that drives my study, is that many white teachers are unable to see the inequities and/or resist notions that their privilege activates racial identities and perceptions about race (Castagno, 2008; Yoon, 2012). Deeply ingrained experiences with race and racism can negatively impact teaching, learning, and student outcomes, which is why conversations about teachers' racial identities and understandings are important.

A New Racism

Because many white teachers think of public schools as welcoming spaces, open to all children, they can be lured into an illusion that they are also race-neutral spaces. In other words, many white teachers adopt the comfortable position of "not seeing color," espousing and often sincerely believing that seeing students as raceless is the most fair,

moral, and effective approach for preparing students to excel academically and socially at school. Not seeing color, or "color-blindness," is the intentional ignoring or overlooking of racial and ethnic differences. White people often justify this stance as a way to promote racial harmony (Applebaum, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Pollock, 2004; Sue, 2015); however, Bonilla-Silva (2018) reminds us in his book, *Racism Without Racists*, that color-blindness "serves today as the ideological armor for a covert, institutionalized system … that aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those it subjects and those it rewards" (p. 4). Jim Crow practices have subsided, but *new racism* practices have taken their place and are "more sophisticated and subtle than those of the Jim Crow era … [but] are as effective as the old ones in maintaining the racial status quo" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 17). Teachers who claim "to not see color" opt to teach from what they believe is a neutral stance, a business-as-usual approach in which they avoid uncomfortable, possibly disruptive topics related to race, hierarchy, and power. But silence is far from neutral. Using color-blindness as rationalization for fair and just teaching simply masks, excuses, or suppresses collective practices that reinforce contemporary racial order (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) and shields many white teachers from uncomfortable, conflict-laden topics such as privilege, oppression, and racism. Color-blindness bolsters silence about race at school, which reinforces the status quo and perpetuates institutional racism.

Color-blindness is an especially prevalent practice within elementary schools. Because elementary schools are typically viewed as locations of innocence, elementary school teachers often see themselves as responsible for protecting naive, curiously fragile, young children from the ugly facets of life, including racism (Miller, 2017). White teachers have been socialized to believe that race talk at school is impolite and

disruptive, if not dangerous, and should be ignored, avoided, or silenced (Sue, 2015). To play the role bestowed upon them, protectors of innocence, white elementary teachers subconsciously employ norms of politeness as an avoidance strategy and subscribe to "sincere fictions" (Applebaum, 2006, p. 355) about the realities of racism. In the process of remaining polite and silent, they assuredly remind themselves that they are "fair, moral, and decent human beings who are not responsible for inequities in the lives of people of color…" (Sue, 2015, p. 24) as they exert great effort to obscure differences and promote sameness. Despite the silence, research confirms a different reality. Children at very young ages notice race, are aware of racism, and have developed particular attitudes about people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Coles-Richie & Smith, 2017; Price-Dennis, Holmes, & Smith, 2016; Priest, et al., 2016; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Yoon, 2012).

Under the guise of color-blindness, white teachers often choose a more appealing, safe path to addressing diversity, an approach that complements color-blindness and sustains its existence - multiculturalism. Characterized by the central goal of "just getting along" and appreciating the different cultures around the world, a commitment to multiculturalism frequently translates to superficial, additive content focused narrowly on food, songs, language, dance, and dress (Castagno, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1998). "An emphasis on the individual rather than the structural, on harmony rather than equity, and on sameness rather than difference - this is what whiteness encourages; it is how we are expected to engage the world" (Castagno, 2013, p. 114). While the intention may be to convey that race ***shouldn't*** matter, multiculturalism communicates to students that race ***doesn't*** matter; we all get along, because we can celebrate our differences.

Differences among citizens is both the challenge and the strength of pluralistic democracy. In this instance, I use *citizen* not to refer to a legally recognized native or naturalized subject, but to mean a person who inhabits and contributes to a particular region. However, when differences such as race are ignored, the status quo in schools, characterized by racial hierarchies, remains intact. Uninterrupted whiteness will continue to cause disproportionalities in education. In order to better understand and improve our current educational situation and identify ways to create equitable schools, we need to do more theorizing about the racial understandings and identities of white teachers, who are currently teaching our nation's youngest children.

Purpose of the Study and the Setting

The field of education abounds with promises and commitments to challenge inequities. Positioned to be democratic locations for teaching and learning, public schools, since their inception, have served as a moral compass, of sorts. Therefore, if the public schools are truly democratic, equitable, and working for the common good, racial disparities in achievement cannot be ignored. Talking about race becomes a necessity, and I believe looking more closely at white teachers, who make up 80-85% of the teaching workforce in the United States of America (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013; Yoon, 2016), is a logical place to begin. The purpose of my study is to explore the racial backgrounds, lived experiences, and racial understandings of three white elementary school teachers with the intention of creating portraits that will illustrate authentic challenges and successes associated with acknowledging and disrupting racial bias. My study adds to the literature by focusing on an underreported occurrence/concern -- the introspection of white elementary school teachers as they unpack the ways in which they learned to construct racial identity and how, when

confronted with issues of race, their perceptions and understandings influence their thinking and decision-making in the classroom.

Holly Hill Elementary (pseudonym), a diverse suburban school and the site of my research, is filled with good-intentioned teachers who assert that they want ALL of their students to perform well academically and socially-emotionally. Teachers at Holly Hill have readily embraced anti-bullying work, including the district's required social-emotional curriculum. They have also committed to whole-staff training in restorative practices and have begun implementing disciplinary strategies such as restorative circles (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010) to address challenging behaviors of students, partly in response to an in-house equity audit on discipline referrals and the disproportionate number of referrals for students of color compared to white students. Even though teachers at Holly Hill have been made aware of disparities in achievement, and most of them outwardly advocate for closing the achievement gap, many of them continue to express uncertainty and/or concern about engaging students in race talk, citing confusion, lack of training, anxiety about making changes to curriculum and instructional practices, and concern that such changes can potentially invite criticism from parents and affect "normal" classroom operations.

Authentic engagement in conversations about race, the achievement gap, and creating schools that meet the needs of ALL children requires white teachers to start, first, with critical self-awareness. They need to analyze their own experiences, biases, beliefs, and attitudes as well as how their position of power in the school influences teaching and learning (Miller, 2017). Holly Hill, a school whose faculty is 77% white, is fortunate to be part of a district that has begun encouraging such examination by engaging educators and the community in conversations about race. Actions that show

the district's commitment to this work include publishing a specific equity plan to address racial disparities in achievement; creating mandatory professional development around culturally responsive instruction; establishing a network of equity teams across all elementary, middle, and high schools; and making efforts to hire more teachers and administrators of color. This context makes Holly Hill Elementary School, a particularly interesting place in which to study white teachers. Faculty members at Holly Hill have been given permission, one could even argue a mandate, to openly address race in schools. The purpose of my research is to examine how white teachers navigate and respond to race issues when given that charge.

Research Questions

In this research, I address one central research question with three subquestions:

1. How do white elementary school teachers navigate race issues in the classroom?
    a. How do perceptions and understandings about race, particularly whiteness, develop and influence their work?
    b. How and when do opportunities for race talk arise during the school day?
    c. What strategies do they employ when opportunities for race talk emerge?

Historical Context of Race

To comprehend the impact of race and racism on public education in America and the degree to which it is part of the American tapestry, one must step back and look at the imprint of race more broadly. Racial categories helped to reconcile one of the nation's moral contradictions during the formation of an independent America. As colonists were demanding freedom, liberty, and independence, many also recognized the economic advantage slavery provided for them. Powerful, influential white male

leaders, like Thomas Jefferson, teamed with scientists to advance the concept that there was conclusive, scientific proof of the superiority of white people (DiAngelo, 2016). They argued that biological differences *seen* with the naked eye, phenotypic traits like skin color and hair texture, justified a natural division of people and that white people were genetically superior, when in fact we know such simplistic divisions were (and still are) crude attempts to maintain dominance.

White people, as members of the dominant culture, used the scientific "proof" to reconcile the moral contradiction between America's ideals and its practices and to maintain their place at the top of society's hierarchy. White men and women used their institutional power to oppress people of color. We have since largely dispelled the myth of scientific racism. It is widely accepted today that race is a complex, *social* construct (Delpit, 1988; DiAngelo, 2016; McIntosh, 1989; Mosley & Rogers, 2015; Price-Dennis, Holmes, & Smith, 2016; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Yoon, 2012). People, ideologies, and institutions manufacture and maintain race.

Political, social, and economic conditions have changed the concept of race over time, producing an elastic, unstable classification system. Because race is contextually nuanced, many people who hold positions of privilege today would not have been awarded such positioning in the past. James Baldwin, American author and social critic, illustrates this occurrence with his comparison of the Irish immigrant experience and the Black American experience:

> The Irish middle passage … was as foul as my own [ancestors'], and as dishonorable on the part of those responsible for it. But the Irish became white when they got here and began rising in the world, [whereas Africans] became black and began sinking (Hardy,, 2003, p. 87).

Despite the inability of scientists and researchers to link race to biological meaning and the unstable and dubious histories of race categories, the social impact of race labels is pernicious. Racism's historical link to power, struggle, and the allocation of resources continues to exist today.

White is a Race

There is widespread documentation that white people fail to see themselves as having a race. Whiteness, for white people, serves as an implicit point of comparison, a relational category, known only in contrast to blackness or brownness, like a background against which all other meaning takes shape (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; DiAngelo, 2016; Frankenberg, 1993). Whiteness has historically been treated as a normalized condition of racelessness, and as a result, "race" is a label applied by white people to non-white people (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; DiAngelo, 2016; Dyson, 2017). Because whites typically classify themselves as raceless, they view problems associated with race as belonging to *others*. Whites think of whiteness as lacking content; however, Frankenberg (1993) asserts that "whiteness does have content inasmuch as it generates norms, ways of understanding history, ways of thinking about self and other, and even ways of thinking about the notion of culture itself" (p. 231).

The concept of whiteness is more than the idea that whites are superior to people of color. DiAngelo (2016) reveals its deeper premise, "that White be used as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm" (p. 148). Beyond notions of supremacy by skin color, whiteness also refers to the historical accumulation of power through a political, economic, and social system of domination by which white people as a group placed themselves at the top of the power pyramid. White people participate, often unknowingly, in the purposeful construction of a system that

values one group's culture and skin color over others. History provides powerful examples of this phenomena (Kendall, 2013):

- White Europeans forcibly removing native people from their land believing it to be their right and destiny to own it
- The US Constitution permitting the holding of Black people as property
- Laws preventing African American slaves from learning to read
- Removing American citizens of Japanese ancestry from their homes and seizing their property during World War II
- The passing of laws like Plessy vs. Ferguson to maintain inequality
- Federal laws prohibiting black people from buying homes in the suburbs

The Invisibility of Whiteness

In addition to wavering sentiments and revised labels for race, the failure of most white people to recognize white as a racial category creates an imposing obstacle to whites acknowledging and understanding what race is and how it operates in society. The danger in whites not seeing their racialized selves is that they fail to see white as a significant construct and therefore minimize, not only the value of being white, but also the need to critically examine or critique this unmarked category (Hytten & Adkins, 2001). Historically, Black scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Baldwin urged white people to stop studying the *other* and turn their attention onto themselves (DuBois at the turn of the century and Baldwin in the 1950s and 60s). Whiteness studies, however, was not solidified as an area of scholarly research until 1980 when Peggy McIntosh, a white female who originally studied the phenomenon of male privilege and associated advantages, published an essay, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1989). She expanded on the ideas of DuBois, Baldwin, and many other Black

scholars, and explained what many members of the majority white culture were never required to consider or confront - that being white grants special status or privileges, often at the expense of others. McIntosh exposed the white position as one marked by the inability to recognize whiteness, as she listed in her essay as many as fifty unearned advantages associated with whiteness. “I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in the invisible systems conferring dominance on my group” (1989, p. 1). McIntosh taps into one of the primary challenges associated with disrupting whiteness and white privilege. Even when some white people are willing to budge cognitively and acknowledge that people of color have been disadvantaged socially, economically, and educationally, they cannot always make the leap to believe or admit the inverse - that they, as a result, are inevitably advantaged. As Michie (2007) describes, “Privilege for whites is like water for fish; it’s all around them, but it’s hard for them to notice it” (p. 6).

It proves difficult, therefore, to acknowledge and analyze what is not named or seen. Whiteness has been made the background by which all other races are compared and measured and is so normalized that, in the white mind, whites can only know it when they contrast it to blackness or brownness. As a result, whiteness arrives at its meaning from identifying what it is not. Although we often treat race as if it is a concrete construction -- we routinely sort, assume, and judge based on phenotypic characteristics like skin color, eye color, hair texture, and bone structure -- it is widely accepted that race is a *social* construct (Delpit, 1988; DiAngelo, 2016; McIntosh, 1989; Mosley & Rogers, 2015; Price-Dennis, Holmes, & Smith, 2016; Yoon, 2012). Apple (2004) points out that race is

> ...contingent and historical. Indeed, it would be misleading to talk of race as an 'it.' 'It' is not a thing, a reified object that can be measured as if it were a simple biological entity. Race is a *construction*, a set of full social *relationships* (p. 75)

Reducing humanness to what is seen through a white lens warrants critical intervention. If we ever plan to break down the social construction of race within the current educational system, whiteness must be made visible. It is necessary for all stakeholders in education to increase racial awareness and understanding, with the most substantial responsibility falling on white educators who make up the majority of the teaching workforce.

The Educational Impact of Whiteness

The impact of race in and on schools is undeniable. Bonilla-Silva (2018) references a devastating return to school segregation by race, reminiscent of policies and practices during the pre-civil rights era. "As a consequence of resegregation during the decade of the 1990s, U.S. schools were more segregated in the 2000-2001 school year than in 1970" (p. 27). He points out that the current gap in achievement between white and non-white students gets public attention but there is also a concerning gap in the *quality* of education being provided to white and nonwhite students. Although some progress has been made in improving racial educational disparities, that progress has been slow, uneven, and incomplete (Musu-Gillette, et al., 2017). Equally disturbing is the silence about these phenomena in our schools, communities, and amongst policymakers. This silence contributes to the persistence of inequity.

Public schools have a legacy of exclusion and limited and differential access for students of color. It is fair to say that the racial climate has been poor, exemplified by the fact that most students of color lag behind their white peers in measures of academic achievement and social capital. For many students of color, school has been, for quite

some time now, a place of disconnection and disengagement; a place where they have to be, but do not want to be. A culture of whiteness makes it easy and convenient for white teachers to “blame the victim” - to single out and attach labels like defiant, unmotivated, incapable, and lazy to individual students of color who struggle. If, however, one takes a different perspective, one that analyzes the systems and inner workings of schools, student engagement can be assessed through structural analysis. Such analysis would reveal that much of the disconnection and disengagement for students of color can be attributed not to individual failure, but to specific oppressive attitudes and practices in public schools (Castagno, 2008; Castagno, 2013).

A Culture of Whiteness

Walk into any elementary school and one will see explicit curricular and social interactions around state approved standards and content, and statistics suggest that such interactions will most likely be led by a white teacher. At school, students are expected to arrive on time, turn in homework, access digital resources, raise their hand to show understanding or to ask questions, and learn core subjects through a variety of instructional strategies and tools such as: group and individual work, experiments, technology, field trips, projects and papers, and tests. Textbooks (if there are any) will typically teach stories from the perspective of white people, like Columbus discovered America, the colonists tamed the savages, and the Founding Fathers created a nation built on freedom and equality. The type of learning teachers expect students to engage in communicates important messages as well. Hytten and Adkins (2001) contend that, “the practices we abide by and transmit are white (individual achievement, success through competition; knowledge as rational, scientific, and objective); and the students who do well are - white” (p. 440). Such formally planned work does more than meet

predetermined standards and objectives; it represents the daily happenings in schools and can be defined as the official, or explicit, school curriculum. Many researchers have explored a larger notion of curriculum and have looked beyond what is explicitly taught to examine the power of the “hidden curriculum.”

The Hidden Curriculum

This other, hidden curriculum can be classified as “off the record” learning and includes unspoken yet anticipated interactions and expectations between teachers, students, and families; rewards and consequences; and the distribution of power (Anyon, 1981; Brownell, 2017). Although less explicit and precise, students internalize the norms, values, and beliefs communicated through the hidden curriculum at school, and the cultural norms and dominant discourses get replicated from generation to generation (Brownell, 2017). The hidden curriculum helps maintain a culture of whiteness in schools.

Though not the first to describe the concept of the hidden curriculum, Anyon (1981) illuminated inequities in schools with her original focus on issues of social class. In her analysis of five elementary schools across communities with varying levels of family income, she exposed how the content and type of instruction differed across contexts and ways the hidden curriculum was enacted by teachers and affected learners. All five schools in her study focused instruction on similar curricular standards, but instructional approaches and expectations varied dramatically. Pedagogy in wealthier, elite schools emphasized creative, conceptual work with a focus on self-management, problem-solving, and individual growth. These students saw themselves in the history they were taught, which helped legitimize their social positioning, and were given much greater control over their learning. In contrast, working class students were

presented with many rules and teacher explanations, with little room for creative work or critical thinking. They were not taught their own history. Teachers emphasized mechanical, rote learning and communicated to these students that they should focus on providing the “right” answers. Explaining how they arrived at their answers was not practiced or valued. Scholars have used Anyon’s findings -- a connection between the hidden curriculum and broader social stratification -- to suggest that predetermined expectations and the stratification of knowledge is alive and well today and includes the intersection of class AND race. Policies that result in inequitable outcomes for students, the resegregation of schools and institutional abuses like basing school funding on property taxes, for example, lead to shameful inequities in schools; help bolster the notion of meritocracy; undermine social responsibility; reproduce dominant, racially based power structures; all while preserving a culture of whiteness (Brownell, 2017).

Seeing Students of Color Through a Deficit Lens

Another way that schools achieve and maintain a culture of whiteness involves white teachers looking at students of color through a deficit lens (Matais & Mackey, 2016). A deficit lens is a racialized frame. It permits white teachers to see students of color as lacking and blame them and their communities for any perceived gaps in achievement or disciplinary problems rather than scrutinize the schooling process and the educational system for their role in student success. Scholars have identified multiple ways that deficit discourse can cause damage to marginalized students, including putting too much faith in standardized testing to rank and sort students, which can result in the overidentification of students of color for remedial classes or special education and underidentification for gifted programs (Castagno, 2013; Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1998); having low expectations in general for students of color, often seeing their funds

of knowledge as lesser, or even meaningless, which impacts relationship-building, motivation, and engagement (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009); and believing that students of color need excessive discipline or control, which sets up power struggles as well as teacher-student relationships built on inaccurate assumptions and distrust (Castagno, 2008; Delpit,1988; Milner, 2011).

Clinging to Standardized Curriculum and Standardized Testing

A third way that schools legitimize and maintain a culture of whiteness is teaching the standardized curriculum and relying on standardized testing as the primary source of information regarding success and failure. These practices reflect dominant white ideologies and norms.

K-12 curriculum frequently omits minority voices and experiences; rarely do teachers help students to understand the connections between race and power (Delpit, 1998; Hawkman, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Several studies demonstrate that young children are capable of sophisticated discussion around race (Berchini, 2016; Bolgatz, 2005a; Bolgatz, 2005b; Castagno, 2008; Hawkman, 2018; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Schieble, 2012), but when the curriculum presents clear opportunities to interrogate racism and the ways that power and knowledge is reproduced and transformed, the trend is for white teachers to steer clear of discussion around these phenomena. Instead they deflect, avoid, or minimize the impact of race and cling to the traditional, standardized curriculum (Berchini, 2016; Bolgatz, 2005a; Hawkman, 2018; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). The ambiguity and avoidance around naming race may be a conscious or unconscious action, but either approach silences race talk, reinforces the notion of meritocracy, and reifies a master narrative that promotes white dominance and innocence.

Policymakers, administrators, educators, and the public at large continue to perpetuate deficit approaches and white innocence when they embrace and frequently use terminology like *achievement gap* and *data driven instruction* (Au, 2013), school reform language that I hear daily as a public school educator. Embedded within managerial models of operation and prescriptive accountability systems within national, state, and local educational agencies is a persistent, bottom line message to teachers that only what is countable and measurable matters. Teachers and students must demonstrate their effectiveness primarily through performance data, usually high stakes, standardized test scores, and schools regularly use such data to rank and sort students. Nearly everything in education today can be reduced to desired measured outcomes, which translates into an audit culture within schools. Constructs such as *achievement gap* and *data driven instruction* are legitimized in the academy where standardized testing is touted as objective and fair, but they also prop up the notion that student success or failure is comparative (whites vs. non-white students) and also located within individuals, removing accountability from the institution. Au (2013) reminds us that "such testing seemingly [holds] the promise that every test taker is offered a fair and equal shot at educational, social, and economic achievement. Problems like racism and class privilege are thus supposedly ameliorated through testing" (p. 13).

Belief that high-stakes, standardized testing is an appropriate means of challenging inequities and closing the achievement gap is rooted in the ideal that the United States operates as a meritocracy. Meritocracy is the perception and the certainty that everyone has an equal chance at becoming successful based purely on individual merit and hard work -- that regardless of social position, economic class, gender, or culture, all Americans have an equal shot at a secure and satisfying life. The same belief

attributes failure to an individual's own deficit or lack of effort. Au (2013) puts forth an intriguing consideration regarding meritocracy and high stakes testing ...

> Akin to systems of capitalist economics, systems of accountability built upon high-stakes standardized testing cannot function if everyone is a 'winner'… if everyone passed the tests there simply would be no way to justify elite status or any form of disparity of education performance at all: every student would qualify for the most elite colleges and jobs, thereby rendering the very hierarchy of elitism obsolete. (p. 14)

Au's point is compelling. Do our policymakers and educational leaders, who tend to be white, truly want to make the hierarchy of elitism obsolete -- especially when whites usually rise to winner status in the system? Au (2013) asks an important question, given the assumptive objectivity of standardized testing and its historical roots in racism, nativism, and eugenics and its designation as a "scientific" way to declare who is mentally inferior:

> ...why is it that, now over 100 years after the first standardized tests were administered in the United States, we have virtually the same test-based achievement gaps along the lines of race and economic class? Given the historical origins of standardized testing in the social efficiency movement… there is no reason to believe that these testing systems could shake off their racist and classist legacies so easily. (p. 12)

Overview of Methodology

Because I was embedded at the site where my research occurred, I used portraiture, a narrative form of qualitative research, as my methodology. Portraiture is a method that enables researchers to provide a detailed, thick description of a person or organization. The graphic description that comprises the portraits drawn by a researcher is produced through individual storytelling. The portraitist obtains those stories through interviews and conversations and relays them through the use of narrative. This unique

method obscures the line between aesthetics and empiricism (Lightfoot, 1997). It shows attentiveness to empirical description but also to aesthetic expression and is characterized by the researcher co-creating the portrait, or rendering, of the subjects. This research method is a natural fit for the professional work I do as an instructional coach. As I work alongside teachers, encouraging self-reflection and analysis of teaching practices, I realize that there is never a single story in our dialogue. Many could be told. Just as I play an active role in selecting themes and determining focal points to examine as the teacher and I co-create a rendering of her as a teacher, so does the portraitist who also creates and determines the rhythm and flow of the narrative. Often compared to ethnography, due to the researcher being embedded in the setting, a subtle but important difference should be noted. Whereas the "ethnographer listens *to* a story, the portraitist listens *for* a story" (Lightfoot, 1997, p. 13) in the participants' dialogue, and produces a final image that helps readers discover something new about of the subject.

I gathered the data to create teacher portraits through a series of three semi-structured interviews with three white elementary school teachers. I designed each interview around a focal point and the second and third interviews built upon the preceding one(s). My intent by using portraiture is more than just creating a story to share information about white teachers' understandings about race as it relates to their work; I hope it will also be a vehicle to inspire and transform. My desire is that, despite some possibly unflattering critical description and narration and potentially troubling revelations, the honest, authentic portraits I co-created with teachers clearly communicate that we all live racialized lives. I want the portraits to move white educators past feelings of defensiveness, denial, and guilt and closer to self-empowerment and social responsibility.

Theoretical Frameworks

I used three theoretical frames to help me name and explain particular phenomena or events related to white teachers' development of racial consciousness and ways that their understandings about race shape interactions and pedagogical decision-making in the classroom. I integrated critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, and culturally sustaining pedagogy in collecting and analyzing data and interpreting findings, creating portraits that illustrate tensions, challenges, and successes associated with white teachers navigating race issues in elementary school classrooms.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Educational researchers typically cite Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate's work (1995) as the entry point of CRT into the field of education. Originally used in legal scholarship and designed to assist with critical analysis of inequities in the American social, economic, and political systems, CRT revolutionized the way we look at education in the way that it highlights institutional culpability in inequitable schooling outcomes by challenging policies and practices steeped in deficit thinking (Valencia, 2012), such as color-blindness and meritocracy. CRT is an essential tool in making visible the systemic racial inequalities within our schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). I find CRT compelling because not only does it help us to illuminate the pervasiveness of racism, it provides tools to *transform* systems and the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, p.3). "Using CRT as a tool to look at race and racism in schools can help uncover embedded racial hierarchy and shed light on teacher agency within it" (Blaisdell, 2016, p. 249). A critical race paradigm is essential when interrogating power in schools. For this study, three of the tenets of CRT helped me examine and elaborate on white teachers navigating race issues in schools.

CRT tenet #1 - racism is perceived as normal.

One tenet of CRT is that racism continues to be pervasive and so ingrained in society that it appears normal and natural. More overt racism exercised in previous eras may no longer exist, but critical race theorists argue that racism has simply evolved to include more subtle forms. The normalization of school outcomes such as racialized tracking, which results in students of color being overrepresented in special education but underrepresented in gifted education and college prep classes, goes unquestioned and even become expected, due to a range of factors. Because American systems like education, law, politics, and economics have been structurally built on the social construct of race and inequalities, CRT asserts that these systems, including schools, continue to reflect and reproduce racism.

CRT tenet #2 - interest convergence.

This tenet entails the idea that being white affords certain privileges and rights and that because racism in schools advances the interests of whites, there is little incentive to eradicate it. The research literature clearly makes the case that schools are locations of whiteness and that white norms and expectations maintain racial hierarchies and inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Yoon, 2012). White privilege often goes unnoticed (if one is white), which helps to reinforce the myth of meritocracy, a belief that success is dependent on individual hard work and effort rather than any “boost” or advantage associated with being white (DiAngelo, 2016). The common meritocratic, “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality reinforces an ideology that people of color create their own circumstances and obstructs the acknowledgment and challenge necessary to change systemic inequities (Picower, 2009). Whites will go to great efforts (often on a subconscious level) to protect their

position at the top of the social hierarchy. This position is maintained through access to status, resources, and opportunities, what Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) refer to as "whiteness as property." Whites expect and rely on the benefits of being white in many facets of life, including schooling. As I interviewed white teachers who exhibit mindfulness regarding race and racism, CRT was useful in examining more deeply their understandings of race as well as their perceptions of agency in countering institutional practices that contribute to racial disparities.

CRT tenet #3 - counternarratives.

A third tenet of CRT is the need to include the voices of people of color in the stories we tell about our past, present, and future. We do not have to look too hard to find, even today, curriculum that leaves out minority voices and experiences, and studies have shown that teachers, even race conscious ones, tend to cling to standardized curriculum. Choosing high quality resources, creating space and making time to synthesize and evaluate abstract ideas, and seeing students through an "abundance lens" rather than a deficit lens all allow teachers to facilitate rich conversations about race while helping students develop critical thinking skills. The ignoring of race, the refusal to consider and insert the stories and voices left out of the mandated curriculum, legitimizes the deletion of history and devalues the worthiness of marginalized groups. Most dangerously, as Applebaum (2006) explains, "Ignoring race, especially when understood as a virtue, can lead people to presume that if overt manifestations of racism are absent, if everyone just seems 'to get along',' then racism has been eliminated" (pp. 346-347). Counternarratives can reveal the experiences of people of color and their marginalization, bringing attention to the harmful effects of racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Counterstorytelling is a thoughtful pedagogical practice and when used helps students achieve a critical understanding of the role of race and racism in society. As I interviewed teachers about their backgrounds and their perceptions of their role and responsibilities at work, I used CRT as a way to explore their interest and effectiveness in seeking and using counternarratives in their work with children, families, and colleagues.

Critical Whiteness Studies

CRT is a useful theoretical lens through which to examine distorted understandings of race and institutional racism, a focus aligned with my study. But in order to analyze the white mindset and problematize the normality of whiteness in schools, more than CRT is needed (Matais, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon & Galindo, 2014). A critique of racism is inseparable from analyzing whiteness, because racism is built upon the maintenance of whiteness. My interest in understanding how white teachers develop racial identity, the troubling pervasiveness of whiteness in schools, and ways white teachers navigate race issues in the classroom, leads me to also draw from the framing lens of critical whiteness studies (CWS).

Critical whiteness studies is a scholarly effort to examine the social construction of race and its impact on social status and privilege. CWS turns the gaze of race studies towards the social construction of whiteness by first naming whiteness and then by developing tools and strategies to dismantle the dominant ideologies associated with it. Since most white teachers do not recognize their racial biases or the normalization of their own power and privilege and cannot locate themselves within a larger system of racism, CWS provided me with tools to analyze and interpret interview data and interrogate how the teachers in my study operationalized whiteness.

Scholars define whiteness as an unstable, invisible, hierarchical, hegemonic identity construct that serves as an organizing mechanism that privileges white people, or people perceived as white, over people of color (Applebaum, 2016; DiAngelo, 2016; Hytten & Adkins, 2001). As holders of power, white people treat racism as if it is a black or brown problem, which helps white people remove themselves from the search for solutions. CWS challenges this perspective and stance. It problematizes the normality of hegemonic whiteness and seeks to illuminate, scrutinize, and destabilize the social construct that fortifies white power while dehumanizing "the other." CWS attempts to do this by making whiteness visible, decentering it from its position of superiority, and dislodging its power (Hytten & Adkins, 2001).

One way scholars draw on CWS to name and disrupt whiteness in schools, according to the research, is by examining more closely white racial identity among teachers, preservice and inservice, unveiling how the social construction of race influences racial perceptions, school climate, and teaching and learning. The literature often reveals that white teachers struggle to see themselves as racialized beings (Nash & Miller, 2015; Picower, 2009). These teachers normalize whiteness to the point of it being invisible, because there are many unspoken dangers associated with naming whiteness. Recognizing and admitting privilege would, for example, require forfeiting the meritocratic and romanticized belief that the founding of America was based on freedom, equality, and fairness for all its citizens. When whites are pressured to contemplate their complicity in systemic oppression, they often try to rectify the cognitive dissonance they feel about themselves as Americans by enlisting defensive declarations like: "My family didn't own slaves!" or "I struggled and grew up poor," to affirm their goodness and deflect any intimation of having taken advantage of unearned privilege. Beyond uncovering

defensive, guilt-ridden, resistant dispositions and race-evasive practices that often interfere with developing race-consciousness, researchers have also used CWS in multiple studies to look at ways that well-intentioned, race-conscious white teachers perpetuate white supremacy, often without realizing it (Berchini, 2016; Crowley, 2016; Hawkman, 2018; Nash & Miller, 2015; Yoon, 2012). Scholars using CWS value and make space for confusion and messiness as whites try to "make the familiar strange" (Hytten & Adkins, 2001, p. 446) and unlearn ingrained, invisible habits of mind. The flexibility CWS affords, to look at both resistance and cooperation, as we analyze teacher moves and decision-making during the difficult work of disrupting whiteness, make it an appealing theory for this study. I use it to explore white teachers' investment in white racial production.

Both theories, CRT and CWS, remind us to center race in discussions about equity and justice in education. CRT helps us analyze the effects of racism, privilege, and oppression of people of color, and CWS, with its gaze directed at whiteness, provides a reminder that simply knowing one is white is not enough -- racism is upheld until everyday acts of whiteness are deconstructed, critiqued, and disrupted. And the work of disruption requires partnership and consultation between whites and nonwhites -- with whites listening more openly, rejecting racialized scripts (white talk), and humbly stepping back to let the voices of people of color speak for themselves.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

In combination with CRT and CWS, I also use Django Paris's (2012) theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) to analyze and interpret practices and mindsets utilized by white, elementary school teachers. I used several criteria to select the teacher in my study, one of which was *mindfulness*, a term I explain in more detail in Chapter 3.

An educator who exhibits mindfulness is genuinely curious about the mainstream power dynamic embedded in schools. Through statements and actions in the classroom and in conversations across the school, mindful teachers willingly interrogate and challenge their assumed role and position in the school and in the lives of all of their students. Additionally, despite the tensions they may feel about their position and role as a white teacher at school, they show an openness and a readiness to critique themselves as well as the mainstream culture of power as they push to abandon deficit thinking while genuinely recognizing and valuing students' own backgrounds.

I mentioned earlier the dangers associated with white teachers routinely viewing students of color through a deficit lens, a view that implies that success in American schools requires students of color to distance themselves from or ignore their heritage and community, trading it for assimilation into white middle-class norms. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) developed an approach to teaching premised on the idea that culture is central to student learning. Ladson-Billings proposed culturally *relevant* instruction (later updated to culturally *responsive* instruction) to accomplish three things: increase the academic success of students of color, provide a way for students to demonstrate cultural competence, and help students to recognize and critique current social inequities (pp. 474-476). Building on the work of Ladson-Billings, along with multiple other scholars who helped formulate what is collectively known as asset pedagogies, including Moll and Gonzalez who conceptualized *funds of knowledge*, Paris (2012) expressed concern that these approaches and practices, ubiquitous in teacher education curriculum today, were falling short of their original goals. He argues that there has been an unfortunate oversimplification of asset pedagogies, that the term *relevant* or *responsive* insinuates that a teacher who simply recognizes culture is doing enough --

that asset pedagogies “have too often been enacted by teachers and researchers in static ways that focus solely on the important ways racial and ethnic difference was enacted in the past without attending to the dynamic enactments of our equally important present or future” (pp. 91-92). Paris proposed the term “culturally *sustaining* pedagogy” (2012) as a way to honor but also extend asset pedagogies by demanding pluralist outcomes. Paris claims that our pedagogies need to do more than be relevant or respond -- “it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95). Paris makes it clear that culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) is central to democratic schooling. He contends that pluralism and cultural practices in the United States are supported in word though rarely in deed and that a “pluralist society needs both the many and the one to remain vibrant” (p. 95). The research literature shows that some white teachers successfully cross socio-cultural barriers and connect with students of color. Their success is often attributed to a sensitivity to student background and culture (Harding, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy, as well as the asset-pedagogy work that came before CSP, provided me a helpful lens for examining how teachers the teachers I interviewed navigated race issues at school -- how and if they understood and/or used culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy (CRSP) in their classrooms.

The Significance of the Study

Many white people are unaware of the depths to which whiteness influences their lives. Dyson (2017) reminds us that “Whiteness is slick and endlessly inventive. It is most effective when it makes itself invisible, when it appears neutral, human, American” (p. 46). The invisibility of whiteness makes it difficult for white educators to comprehend

and accept that teaching and learning is shaped by an overwhelming culture of white dominance. It is dangerously naive to think that a mostly white teaching workforce does not impact student/teacher interactions, for example, what is said during verbal exchanges, how the words are heard and perceived, and how various parties respond to each other's words and body language. Most of us would like to believe that, when it comes to teaching algebra, the scientific method, or how to write an essay, a teacher's skill, not her skin color, should be what counts, but plenty of research points to the fact that race matters in school.

The price of whiteness has had horrific consequences for children of color, a fact supported by explicit data: a large and persistent achievement gap between white students and students of color as well as significant disparities in dropout rates, participation in advance courses, and college completion rates. These facts are disturbing, but at least these issues get some air time, both inside and outside of school. The significance of my study is that it seeks to enter guarded, inhibited locations to investigate the most silent settings for race talk, elementary classrooms, to examine how white teachers handle race issues. The point of my study is not to accentuate the effects of institutionalized racism but to pay attention to subtle, invisible, pernicious contributions to inequities in schools as well as variations of disruption and teacher success. To break the silence about race and challenge inequities that prevent some students from obtaining the education they deserve, we must closely examine white teachers' perceptions about race and their actions in the classroom. If we fail to examine the white teacher's mindset, if we ignore the subtleties of racial identity, we run the risk of perpetuating white privilege and preserving racial hierarchies in schools. Looking more closely at our white elementary teachers -- the ways they construct racial identity and

navigate race issues -- is a logical place to begin investigation, disruption, and ultimately transformation.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter is organized to analyze scholarly literature relevant to the question: *How do white teachers navigate issues of race in elementary classrooms?* Educational researchers confirm that children notice race, use race to organize their social world, and develop particular attitudes about people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Schaffer & Skinner, 2009). School plays a powerful role in the social construction of racial identity, with race being "a major indicator for how schools are organised and who fares best within them" (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017, p. 173). School experiences necessitate that children decode and interpret systems of power within the school building. For many students of color, school experiences suggest racially inscribed roles, as evidenced in academic tracking, test scores, and graduation rates (Nash & Miller, 2015). However, despite observable hierarchies in schools, teachers rarely talk about race with students -- the way it has been configured throughout history, and its intersections with power -- leaving students to arrive at their own conclusions (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Price-Dennis, Holmes, & Smith, 2016; Priest et al., 2016; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Yoon, 2012). Treated as taboo conversation, especially in elementary schools (Buchanan, 2015; Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Glazier, 2003; Miller, 2017; Tatum, 1992), silence about race in classrooms communicates a sanitized message that everything is okay in the school building, a message that contrasts greatly with racial tensions reflected outside of school and communicated through news stories, social media, marches, protests, and a multitude of

daily interactions. When race is ignored at school, the hidden curriculum and status quo, characterized by racialized hierarchies, remains intact.

In this review of literature, I explore a phenomenon worth investigation: white teachers, who make up 80-85% of the teaching workforce, typically avoid and/or silence race talk in the classroom, talk that tends to trigger strong emotions, anxiety, and defensiveness. A few white teachers, however, successfully cross social and racial boundaries and confront race in a way that builds community, empowers marginalized students, and improves learning. What factors and/or dynamics influence white teachers' ability to confront race and engage in race talk?

A comprehensive body of research suggests that there is a connection between teachers' perceptions about race and their ability to build relationships with diverse groups of students (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Harding, 2005; Nash & Miller, 2015; Picower, 2009; Priest, Walton, White, Kowal, Fox, & Yin, 2016; Ullucci, 2011). Research studies that examine teachers navigating race and race talk are replete with urban school examples (Castagno, 2013; Harding, 2005; Matais & Mackey, 2015; Ullucci, 2011); middle and high school teachers grappling with it (Bolgatz, 2005; Milner, 2011; Segall & Garrett, 2013; Shim, 2018), and analyses of preservice teachers' ability to transfer university coursework about culturally relevant teaching to classroom practice (Buchanan, 2015; Miller, 2017; Nash & Miller, 2015; Picower, 2009). Fewer studies focus attention on elementary teachers in suburban, racially diverse schools, a demographic I closely examine in this study. It is imperative to investigate teacher contributions to the maintenance of whiteness across all grade levels, but especially within the most silent location for race talk, elementary classrooms.

The literature also points to a need to create spaces for teachers, preservice and practicing, to explore and reflect on factors that influence their racial consciousness, beyond an isolated university course. Whiteness is a foreign, invisible concept for most white teachers. In this study, I investigate white elementary teachers within a unique context. The school district where my research occurred is attempting to disrupt the silence and create spaces for reflection, growth, and engagement in conversations about race. We rarely hear from teachers in these types of school districts. Uncovering connections between teachers' perceptions about race and pedagogy, within a district that expects and supports equitable practices, can potentially provide insight rarely reported in the literature.

A problem that drives my study is that many white teachers are unable to see inequities in school and how their privilege or position of power activates perceptions about race (McIntosh 1989; Miller, 2017; Nash & Miller, 2015; Picower, 2009). In this study, I explored how teachers' understandings about race influence their work; my study adds to the literature by focusing on an underreported concern, the introspection of white elementary school teachers as they unpack the ways in which they learned to construct racial identity and how, when confronted with issues of race, their perceptions and understandings influence their thinking and decision-making in the classroom.

I divide the analysis of literature into three sections. In the first section I define whiteness. Beginning with broad, general definitions of whiteness, I will show how the dominant ideology and systemic culture of whiteness is replicated in public schools -- how racism is inserted and maintained in the institution of education simply by doing what is "normal." In the second section, I focus specifically on white teachers, elucidating how they construct racial identity and how their understandings of race influence their

thinking and work with children. In the final section of my literature review, I describe pedagogical strategies and discursive moves white teachers employ as they navigate race issues.

Whiteness

White space, *white* noise, little *white* lie -- the color “white” has been used to represent insignificance, a connotation of nothingness... something in the background... something so trivial and nondescript it does not warrant one’s attention, emotion, or scrutiny. White, as it is rooted in the white imagination of racial identity, has also come to signify that which is neutral, bland, invisible, and easily dismissed. But whiteness is far from insignificant. Whiteness is a system of racial power, a social inheritance passed on to whites through their membership within a particular group. Its privileged position depends on the subordination of non-whites and is maintained through the ideologies, institutions, and practices that come to define it.

An essential problem in matters of race is that any search for understanding usually results in a default reference to a black/white binary paradigm (DiAngelo, 2016). This binary framework leads to many liabilities. First, it misrepresents diverse people as monolithic, obscuring the complex intersection of race with class, gender, and/or sexuality. For example, a wealthy, well-educated black male from the suburbs will have experiences that vary greatly from a poor, uneducated, black male from an urban area. Also, the contributions of nonblack racialized minorities, Latino(a) and Native or Asian Americans, are minimized. White people, too, as members of the top of the power pyramid, are viewed in limited ways when the binary framework comes into play. The black/white binary nurtures oversimplified images of whites as racists and colonizers without regard to intersectionality. Within American culture, citizens are typically

characterized as having a position in only one of two locations, on either side of the color line, obscuring complex relationships between members of all groups. As Painter states, “Whiteness is on a toggle switch between ‘bland nothingness’ and ‘racist hatred’” (Painter, 2015).

To avoid discomfort and injury and to stay safe from being labeled a racist or oppressor, white people deliberately or unconsciously employ a way to manage the pain and shame that accompanies such labels, which calls for downplaying the importance and value of race, especially whiteness, attempting to construct the idea that things are not so bad for black people, after all. But it is a disingenuous attitude. Responses elicited by a college professor’s provocative exchange with students illustrate that things are, in fact, pretty bad for blacks, and whites have a clearer understanding of the situation than they outwardly admit. Dr. Andrew Hacker, author and professor emeritus at Queens College in New York, examined race with his students during the 90s and uncovered an interesting revelation. One of his experiments involved asking students to contemplate a role switch. He set up a scenario in which white students were informed that a mistake was made, one that required them to change their race and live the rest of their lives outwardly appearing black, though inwardly unchanged. After describing the scenario and the switch, Hacker asked this question of his white students, “How much financial recompense would you request?” (Thompson, 1999, p. 144). His students were quick to insist on as much as 50 million dollars. If race was equal, then why the request for compensation, and why such an exorbitant amount? Interestingly, Ted Koppel, renowned American broadcast journalist, replicated the experiment and broadened its audience. He too received similar high dollar demands ranging from $250,000 a year for 50 years to a flat fee of $50 million. These experiments demonstrate that even though

white people try to downplay the significance of race, they do see a difference in race, and they place a greater value on white skin color.

White Teachers and Racial Identity

State departments of public instruction require teachers to complete a formal, tertiary program of study in education before they authorize a teaching license. This requirement indicates the belief that postsecondary training is a critical component in the development and preparation of professional educators. Concerned about the demographic dilemma of mostly white educators educating an increasingly diverse group of students, administrators of teacher preparation programs have begun to include opportunities to take courses in culturally relevant pedagogy or engage in practical classroom experiences in culturally and racially diverse settings. The intention behind these courses and experiences is to help teachers develop greater racial awareness, believing such exposure facilitates closing the cultural divide between white teachers and students of color. Much of the literature on teachers' racial awareness confirms, however, that teachers, even when exposed to additional sources of influence such as university courses and professional development at their school sites, bring assumptions into the classroom, based on their lived experiences, that potentially have greater impact on their teaching than does professional training (Johnson, 2015; Miller, 2017; Nash et al., 2017; Nash & Miller, 2014; Picower, 2009). Teachers' predispositions and perceptions about race, cultivated in early childhood and developed over time, shape the work they do with children.

Autobiographical interviews of white teachers across a large body of research on racial identity reveal that a substantial part of "becoming raced" usually happens unconsciously (Buchanan, 2015; Johnson, 2002; Miller, 2017; Picower, 2009; Shim,

2018; Ullucci, 2011). A variety of lived experiences, many during early childhood, contribute to white teachers' conceptualization of race and "others" and remind us that racial knowledge and construction has a long and often complicated social history. The way white teachers manage that history and self-awareness can either impede or facilitate their ability to connect with students of color. Analysis of research interviews of white teachers bring forth several themes:

- White teachers who struggle to connect with students of color usually do so because they are unable to comprehend whiteness and their privileged position within a larger system of racism.
- Even the most introspective white teachers experience challenges when trying to dismantle some of their earliest teachings and habits of mind related to race.
- White teachers who succeed in bridging cultural divides often cite personal struggle as a key factor in developing empathy and making connections with students.

The Power of Socialization

Research supports that white teachers' ideas about race are formed early and prove difficult to specify and assess, partly because the construction of race is ubiquitously embedded in day-to-day, lived experiences and is reinforced through family interactions within predominantly same-raced communities (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Johnson, 2002; Miller, 2017; Nash & Miller, 2015; Shim, 2018; Tatum, 1992; Ullucci, 2011). The literature on the construction of racial identity verifies that a large number of white teachers recall both explicit and implicit parental and societal messages about social position and race during early childhood (Buchanan, 2015; Nash, Howard, Miller, Boutte, Johnson, & Reid, 2017; Picower, 2009; Shim, 2018). Explicit messaging

(in addition to overt messages of racist beliefs), is often described in the literature as conversations laced with themes of meritocracy, individualism, trusting the establishment, patriotism, and a belief in a post-racial society (Buchanan, 2015; Picower, 2009; Segall & Garrett, 2013; Shim, 2018; Tatum, 1992). Implicit messages about race are commonly described as subtly communicated through behaviors like parents choosing to live in a particular neighborhood based on race, people choosing only same-raced friends, and/or white family members and friends expressing fear when in the presence of people of color (Nash & Miller, 2015; Segall & Garrett, 2013; Shim 2018).

Shim's research (2018) illuminates some explicit messages about race. Chris, a white high school science teacher, remembers his father reinforcing the notion of the American Dream, that America is an equal opportunity landscape and takes care of any individual who is willing to work hard enough (p. 137). Socializing children to believe in meritocracy, the belief that individuals rise to the top through hard work and individual merit, allows many white people to distance themselves from racism (Tatum, 1992). By reinforcing a common white narrative -- that I succeed because I am smart, fair, and hard-working -- white people can minimize or even deny the impact of race on social positioning, which permits them to naturalize the social order. As a member of a white family, who attended a mostly white school, within a white neighborhood, Chris positioned himself to take advantage of a privilege only available to white people; he viewed himself and his success outside of race. DiAngelo (2016) elaborates

> … people of color are almost always seen as 'having a race' and described in racial terms...whereas whites are rarely defined by race, thereby allowing whites to move through society as 'just people.' Individualism also allows whites to see [themselves] as objective and people of color as having 'special' or biased group interests and agendas. (p. 201)

A teacher like Chris, who has been taught that the onus of success or failure falls squarely on the individual and has nothing to do with institutions and social systems may find it difficult to see inequities at school and develop a critical consciousness and orientation to pedagogy. “In order for teacher candidates, particularly white teacher candidates, to be effective critical pedagogues, they must be able to see and believe that a person of color’s racialized experiences are a wealth of capital rather than a narrative of bitterness” (Matais & Mackey, 2016, p. 43).

Studies by Buchanan (2015) and Segall and Garrett (2013) provide additional examples of how lived experiences and dispositions about race can negatively impact how teachers see and interact with students of color and how such dispositions may influence a white person’s approach to discussions about race. The researchers in both studies position race as a central focus in discussions with preservice teachers. Even though they use different tools to encourage engagement, they expose common moves of whiteness, including race-evasiveness through color-blind discourse.

Buchanan (2015) intentionally positioned race as the central topic for class discussions and narrative reflection with three groups of university students to engage them in race talk and in the unpacking of whiteness. 91% of preservice teachers in Buchanan’s study either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, *race is controversial*, further describing race talk as “...problematic, uncomfortable, and potentially offensive” (p. 11). While her assignments helped some students reflect on race and engage in self-analysis, the overriding response of most students involved hesitation and avoidance. Her preservice teachers, 96% of whom were white, indicated that race talk could vary greatly depending on the people with whom they were conversing. They described more comfort with like-minded family and friends and huge

discomfort with people who may have opposing points of view as well as young children (pp. 13-17). Buchanan's findings clearly show that teachers' prior experiences with race and preconceived notions about race influence their understandings, beliefs, and comfort with race -- the teachers themselves could make that connection. But her study unmasks a larger problem as well. These same white teachers, who were able to realize their discomfort with race, were unable to see a link between their whiteness and its potential impact on their future teaching and their role as teacher. Because these teachers do not understand their own racial experiences, they are likely to interpret the racial experiences of students of color inaccurately. Like Buchanan, in my research, I looked at ways that teachers contemplate and understand race and construct racial identity. However, I chose to conduct my study in a district that is engaged in equity work and has been for many years. The Rockwell Heights district (pseudonym) requires all of its teachers to complete an equity course that includes historical explanations about race and power in America and exposure to culturally responsive and sustaining practices (CRSP). The elementary school where the teachers in my study worked, Holly Hill, has an active Equity Team that provides training and resources to faculty and staff throughout the year. Studying white teachers in this type of setting contributes to the literature by examining whether or not being part of a district and a school that openly challenges teachers to critically consider race, results in deeper reflection, more frequent conversations, and a lessening of the discomfort related to race talk for white teachers.

Segall and Garrett (2013) used a documentary film directed by Spike Lee as their tool to engage five white preservice social studies teachers in race talk. Entitled, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts,* the documentary intentionally exposes race as a factor in the deaths and devastation associated with Hurricane Katrina. Segall and

Garrett unmask some common, effective strategies linked to maintaining whiteness, including avoidance of race through the use of colorblind discourse, but they go further to explain white resistance to racism by differentiating between passive and active ignorance. They offer the concept of *difficult knowledge,* defined as "...knowledge that destabilizes our understanding about how the world works… a feedback loop of meaning-making where one's understanding of other people and one's own personal histories interfere with one another" (p. 270). It is true that some white teachers make assumptions and act on race based on ignorance in its passive form, a simple lack of knowledge. But Segall and Garrett describe the use of sophisticated maneuvers that allow white teachers to exclude known facts from consciousness, as a way to stay safe when their new understanding of "others" starts to interfere with their personal histories and narratives (p. 270). Participants in the documentary film study recognize or invoke race several times during interview discussions about the film, but they work incredibly hard to diminish the relevance of race by fitting the information they viewed into well-established narrative frames that promote meritocracy and individualism. Segall and Garrett (2013) theorize that white teachers may embrace and hide behind passive ignorance, the white narrative of *not knowing,* to avoid implicating themselves in such knowing. But they point out that this process of "staying safe" requires great effort and, therefore, must be described as an active form of ignorance (p. 287), as well as a barrier to improved race relations and outcomes in schools.

Introspection Is Not Enough

The studies I have described thus far paint a clear image of resistance -- teachers who put great energy into protecting themselves from being viewed as privileged, unfair, or responsible for inequities and prefer insulating themselves from

conversations about race. However, many white teachers show mindfulness -- a willingness to openly recognize their privilege and a desire to reflect and interrogate their whiteness and its impact on teaching and learning (Berchini, 2016; Crowley, 2016; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008; Nash & Miller, 2015; Pennington, 2007). Dismantling racism is difficult work, however. Even when introspective teachers recognize their whiteness and consider larger systems that advantage anyone with white skin, their words and actions frequently stay rooted in whiteness. The studies I review in this section offer snapshots of introspective white teachers grappling with racism as well as contexts that impact the transfer of their intellectual understandings about race to practical, real-time applications of that knowledge.

I observe comparable tensions across two different studies. Berchini (2016) and Crowley (2016) investigate how race-conscious teachers, preservice and novice, dissect their own concepts about race and respond to school context. Berchini follows Ms. T into her classroom, a novice teacher who demonstrates mindfulness and reports an eagerness to talk about race. Ms. T views the required high school unit on the Holocaust as a vehicle and opportunity to discuss diversity, implicit bias, and prejudice and teach social justice via the curriculum, however, she quickly confronts a dilemma. When a student of color attempts to engage with the memoir, *Night*, by Elie Wiesel, by connecting the story of the oppression of Jewish people in Germany to segregation in the United States, challenging Ms. T on the theme of the book, she evades conversation. When the student expresses his belief that individual agency does not matter when it comes to systemic oppression, a theme not mentioned in the curriculum guide, Ms. T gets defensive, ends up clinging to her curricular script, and silences race talk. Even though Ms. T entered the context well aware of her position as a white, female

educator with race-conscious goals, she falls into a pattern of whiteness. Curricular demands combined with an unsteady confidence about her ability to carry a productive, yet emotional conversation about race leads her to interactions and instructional practices that contrast with her race-consciousness, and ultimately, she ends up obstructing race talk by acquiescing to the curriculum.

Morrison et al. (2008) uncovered perplexity similar to Ms. T's experience. Their synthesis of forty-five research studies on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) revealed little evidence of teacher candidates succeeding with this well-documented instructional framework that includes specific strategies to address inequalities in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995). According to their findings, "Culturally relevant pedagogy ultimately clashes with the traditional ways in which education is carried out in our society, thus making culturally relevant teaching actions seem herculean to many teachers" (Morrison et al., 2008, p. 444). Educators who wish to teach social justice through CRP are required to make difficult choices, spend significant time with colleagues to create race-conscious curriculum, and exert significant efforts to build relationships with students' families. Given the strong pressure to produce glowing test scores, in addition to the multitude of demands placed on teachers (differentiating instruction, learning and refining teaching techniques, acquiring classroom management skills, responding to parent emails, grading papers, etc.), many educators, especially novice ones, find the sacrifices required to enact CRP too overwhelming, leading many of them to stick with the standardized curriculum (Brownell, 2017). For students of color, the consequences of such decision-making include expectations to engage (and excel) in a curriculum that feels alien to their own experiences and promises limited voice and choice in the learning process.

Crowley (2016) directs our attention to a cohort of race-conscious white teachers and contradictions that emerge as they engage in topics about race and are challenged to situate themselves within the larger American racial hierarchy. Across six case studies, Crowley documents white teachers skillfully engaging in the analysis of race using *transgressive thinking*, an ability to disrupt typical norms of whiteness and analyze race on an intellectual level (p.1025). Evidence of such an approach includes participants' critiques of behaviors that maintain whiteness in schools, such as: minimizing the salience of race, deficit thinking, the normalization of whiteness, color-blind and meritocratic discourse, and teaching a curriculum that lacks relevance for students of color. Complications arise, however, when conversations threaten to reveal the teachers' own possible complicity in racial inequality as they are encouraged to examine their own anti-racist practices. Crowley documents teachers more readily *negotiating* the dissonance between their proclaimed, intellectual, race-conscious stance and their more emotional, intuitive *white talk* (McIntyre, 1997) within their urban school context. Some of the discursive ways white teachers negotiated the racial terrain were by mentioning a lack of safety regarding conversations about race in the classroom, expressing discomfort and hesitancy in managing the messiness of race talk, as well as minimizing the importance and relevance of race in the social outcomes of students by drawing attention to other factors, such as gender and class. Such behavior may have been an earnest attempt to explore intersectionality (DiAngelo, 2016), but it problematizes those teachers' critical analyses of race. "Their negotiations created openings that released them from complicity in small ways" (Crowley, 2016, p. 1025).

Returning to a study mentioned earlier (Shim, 2018), a white educator, Chris, commends his university coursework for helping him rethink early messages about race

and racial positioning. His intentions may have been good; however, even with his new knowledge about race and awareness of culturally responsive teaching practices, contradictions emerge for him as well. He indicates that his professional workplace is a location where racial insensitivity is unacceptable, but he shirks his responsibility to interrupt or challenge racism outside of the school setting when he returns home to friends and family. Chris' whiteness allows him to decide when and in which locations racist attitudes can slide and when they need attention, suggesting a normalization of whiteness and the oppression of "others." As Chris talks about his family ideologies and college experiences, his interviews reveal complex social variables that shape his perceptions about race. Shim's research (2018), along with Crowley's (2016), is relevant to my line of inquiry about teachers' navigating race issues. The teachers in each study clearly illustrate some of the nuances and difficulties many white teachers grapple with as they attempt to reconcile intellectual knowledge about race with their intuitive, subliminal thoughts and feelings shaped during childhood. Based on my own observations and participation as an educator in the Rockwell Heights district, this unsteady grappling with race is familiar. Teachers at Holly Hill, although capable of engaging in the analysis of race using similar *transgressive thinking*, may often be lured into comfortable, perhaps invisible, modes of whiteness due to similar racial messaging in childhood as well as institutionalized racism in schooling.

The competing and often contradictory discourses that I discovered in this compilation of research reveals honest reflection and dialogue that often insinuates race-conscious stances, only to be disrupted by race-evasive behavior and discourse by white teachers. Such findings expose the complexity and contradiction associated with the development of racial awareness. Unsteady and inconsistent feelings and attitudes

about race return even when many white teachers are trying to disrupt their racial socialization histories. This indicates that the durability of early racial formation makes critical consciousness around issues of race and power complex and challenging for many white teachers. The literature points to a need to create spaces for teachers, preservice and inservice, to explore life experiences and racial autobiographies in order to clarify both their views on race as well as the construction of their own racial identity. The school district and elementary school in which my study takes place has already designated the examination of racial consciousness as a priority, as evidenced in their district-wide equity plan, their mandatory equity course, and their lesson planning template that includes prompts to include culturally responsive and sustaining practices. My study presented a unique opportunity to further examine white teachers grappling with race within an environment that claims to support critical stances and strives to disrupt whiteness in schools and improve outcomes for all students.

The Bridge-Builders

Accounts of race-conscious white teachers successfully connecting with students from different backgrounds can help us understand how some white teachers cross the racial and cultural divide and build positive relationships with students of color. What factors or experiences help these white teachers reflect on race, reconstruct some of their original interpretations, reject deficit mentalities, and apply their intellectual understandings of whiteness in practical ways as they educate students of color? Several studies highlight successful, yet unsteady, navigation of race by white teachers (Harding, 2005; Johnson, 2002; Miller, 2017; Ullucci, 2011).

One such success story is told by Johnson (2002) through her investigation of six, white classroom teachers, considered by colleagues to be reflective, racially aware

practitioners. All six teachers taught in racially diverse schools and were considered skilled at connecting with students of color. The purpose of Johnson's study was to investigate the influence of pre-training, during higher education, on building racial awareness. With the exception of one teacher, all participants reported that their university training had little to do with their racial awareness, but Johnson's analysis of the participants' autobiographical race narratives revealed that they attributed their success with students of color to personal associations with people of color -- participation in relationships that featured equal status. Increased exposure to people of color, interactions which included engaging in cooperative work with people of color, developing lasting friendships, and/or creating partnerships and family structures through interracial relationships, helped several white teachers gain exposure to different perspectives resulting in a broader world view and reduced prejudice.

Ullucci (2011) and Harding (2005) also reveal that the participants in their studies, white teachers deemed effective in educating students of color, attribute successful bridge-building to life experiences. First-hand knowledge of people of color gained through close friendships, living in a multiracial neighborhood, attending a diverse school, and/or marital/familial relationships with people of color, provided them with eyewitness accounts of injustice and inequities. "Because these teachers *know*, because they have a wider breadth of experiences, they did not have the need to 'make up' identities for 'others' based on half-truths and stereotypes" (Ullucci, 2011, p. 575). They witnessed the direct impact of race, so pretending that race was irrelevant was impossible. Color-blindness, for them, was an unacceptable and distorted lens through which to view the world.

The most prominent theme across literature that references bridging the cultural divide between white teachers and students of color is *perceived marginalization* (Harding, 2005; Johnson, 2002; Ullucci, 2011). Whether teachers alluded to identity factors like being on welfare, in foster care, or the poorest kid at school (Johnson, 2002), or they claimed another particular kind of racial/cultural isolation, like being an immigrant child, the only white kid in a minority neighborhood, or being gay, it was not difficult for these white teachers to identify with being outside the mainstream (Harding, 2005; Miller, 2017; Ullucci, 2011). Because of their personal experience with marginalization, they could express a deep understanding of how equity functioned, or failed to function, in their surroundings. Their personal struggles furnished them with the ability to empathize with marginalized students. As Ullucci (2011) eloquently summarizes, "...they see pieces of themselves in their students. They built bridges between their lives and the lives of their students across these places of struggle. Such shared experiences matter. They build solidarity and empathy between people regardless of race" (p. 576). Lived experiences, according to these teachers, made a far greater impact on their success with students of color than university coursework and formal programs of study.

While the literature makes it clear that lived experiences matter more than formal coursework-- that white teachers who experience diversity and perceived marginalization personally find it easier to bridge the cultural divide with students of color -- it remains unclear what we do with white teachers who enter a formal university education program without this type of exposure and first-hand knowledge. This dilemma demands further study. If biases and white privilege are invisible to the majority of teachers, then it is safe to assume that most teachers are not creating spaces for young students to critically examine and interrupt those biases.

The invisibility of whiteness and privilege impede the transformation of the current educational system into a more inclusive and equitable one. Numerous researchers point to the need for individual teachers to examine their own racial biographies. Without personal reflection and awareness of one's own beliefs about race, bridge-building will be severely compromised and marginalized students will continue to feel disengaged. The sequential interview process I used with the participants in my study helped me probe into racial biographies and address a curiosity associated with my interests: investigating how teachers' understandings of race came to be and ways that such understandings influence their pedagogical decision-making as they navigate race issues at school.

Pedagogical Strategies for Success

Research featuring successful white teachers reveals a distinct trend. The literature shows that teachers who connect with and effectively motivate and educate students of color often use strategies associated with culturally responsive practices (CRP), a pedagogical concept conceptualized by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) and one that is ubiquitous in teacher preparation programs today. For the purposes of this study, I think it is necessary to point out the rise of Django Paris' (2012) culturally sustaining practices (CSP) within the field of education, a pedagogical mindset that I mentioned in Chapter 1. An updated remix of CRP, warmly embraced by Ladson-Billings, Paris' CSP builds on decades of asset-based pedagogical research but aims to move beyond acceptance and tolerance of differences, goals associated with CRP, and more towards explicitly supporting aspects of students' cultural traditions. "Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Paris'

proposed extensions to CRP are celebrated by many social justice educators and researchers and are considered more modern and reflective of the multiplicities of identities and cultures that formulate modern youth culture. For the purposes of this study, I honor the foundational work of Ladson-Billings as well as the astute and passionate extensions proposed by Django. Ladson-Billings (2014) says, “Any scholar who believes that she has arrived and the work is finished does not understand the nature and meaning of scholarship” (p. 82). Because Ladson-Billings and Paris agree that theories must evolve and change, I will label pedagogy that (1) aims to ensure achievement for all students, (2) develops cultural competence by perpetuating and fostering—sustaining—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism, and (3) helps students develop critical perspectives in order to challenge the status quo, as culturally responsive *and* sustaining pedagogy. I will express the combination of these asset pedagogies as CRSP.

White teachers who cross social boundaries and improve outcomes for students of color are teachers who have high expectations for all students, help students develop cultural competence, and foster critical perspectives that challenge inequitable social structures. Key components of CRSP, often cited as best practices for ALL students, include specific pedagogic decisions and actions such as: communicating clear expectations and consequences; developing a sense of student ownership amidst high expectations and support; mixing structure and order with charisma and positive energy; emphasizing learning beyond skills, including HOW to learn and be students; as well as validating students’ cultures and knowledge in a safe respectful environment.

An exemplary demonstration of the use of CRSP is documented in Harding’s (2005) portraiture of “City Girl,” a successful White, urban teacher. Interviews and

observations allow entry into her thinking as she explains her pedagogic decision to explicitly examine the culture of power with her students, as a matter of necessity, because issues of power permeate schools: “the power of the teacher over the students; the power of the publishers of textbooks and the developers of curriculum to determine the view of the world presented…” (Delpit, 1988, p. 283). City Girl makes sure she simultaneously recognizes her power as a white teacher and “speaks straight” with students. As if channeling Lisa Delpit (1988) and her instructional maneuvers seventeen years prior, City Girl describes her explicit conversations about power with her students, which includes her annual *‘people outside of this building want us to fail’* speech (Harding, 2005, p. 70). She, as Delpit (1988) suggests, explicitly teaches the codes to participate in the culture of power with the goal to move her students of color beyond a fatalistic, “that’s just the way it is,” mindset and closer to an activist-oriented, hopeful one. Her journey, professionally and personally, is a source of stress. As a white teacher, City Girl grapples with her own position. She knows that despite her urban connection to her students, there is no denying that she is a figure of power, a white teacher training her students of color on how to navigate the white world. Her discomfort derives from feeling like she is teaching her students how to act more white. City Girl experiences the tricky balance Delpit (1988) refers to when teaching other people’s children. “To imply to children...that it doesn’t matter how you talk or how you write is to ensure their ultimate failure” (p. 292). As educators teach the codes and how to navigate them, they must be careful not to dismiss or diminish the students’ unique cultural traits -- language, values, norms. City Girl affirms her students’ language and celebrates their unique cultural backgrounds, while also teaching them that “there is a political power game...being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games that

they too must play (Delpit, 1988, p. 292). Teachers who successfully employ CRSP are able to convey to marginalized students that “playing the game” is different from passively adopting an alternate code (Delpit, 1988). “[Students] must be encouraged to understand the value of the code they already possess as well as understand the realities in this country. Otherwise they will be unable to work to change these realities” (p. 293).

The literature shows that the construction of racial identity is typically an unconscious process for white teachers. White elementary school teachers mindfully interrogating and challenging their own race consciousness is *not* a prominent theme in the literature, and mindful white teachers navigating race within a district that is openly engaging the school community to acknowledge and understand the inherent historical, institutional, and structural aspects of racism is grossly under studied. The first step in changing inequities in schools involves white teachers acknowledging and confronting their own implicit biases and perceptions about race. “With consciousness comes action, and with action comes transformation” (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 204). In my study, I analyze, so as to better understand, mindful white teachers navigating race issues in the classroom -- teachers who are trying to look at the world from new angles, opening themselves to transformation. Imagine the monumental shift we would see in education if white teachers could and would see their own whiteness. They would see how their culture subordinates other cultures; they would see the seductive myth of a post-racial society; they would see ways that white teachers can mitigate or exacerbate the racist effects of schooling. They would also see the need to unlearn assumptions and norms associated with privilege. My study fills a gap in the literature by taking readers into one of the most guarded, inhibited, and silent places about race, the elementary classroom.

This type of investigation helps us reimagine the classroom and its potential to empower all students when it functions as a space where culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy is not radical or unusual, but simply the norm, and where student outcomes are not predetermined by skin color.

CHAPTER III

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A large body of research characterizes most American classrooms as silent or evasive when it comes to *race talk* (Bolgatz, 2005; Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Mosley & Rogers, 2015), talk that is defined as potentially threatening, difficult dialogue that often arouses intense emotions for participants due to the likelihood of unmasking white privilege as well as inequities imposed on people of color (Sue, 2015). Discursive silence and evasion can obstruct conversations about race in the classroom by encoding race without naming it. Left unchallenged, many educators will continue to engage in practices that minimize or avoid equity issues, maintain the status quo, and perpetuate discriminatory practices. The purpose of this study was to explore the racial backgrounds and lived experiences of three white elementary school teachers to illuminate their understandings and perspectives about race, particularly whiteness, and the variety of ways such knowledge influences their work, including the strategies they employ to navigate race issues in the classroom. I created portraits to illustrate authentic challenges and successes associated with acknowledging and disrupting racial bias. Findings from this study can potentially inform the way we prepare and support new and experienced teachers, influence curriculum and the delivery of instruction, inspire ethical action and improvements in professional practice, but may ultimately prove advantageous, in a larger context, in improving race relations and creating equitable schools.

Research Questions

In this qualitative study, I address one primary research question and three subquestions:

1. How do white elementary school teachers navigate race issues in the classroom?
    a. How do perceptions and understandings about race, particularly whiteness, develop and influence their work?
    b. How and when do opportunities for race talk arise during the school day?
    c. What strategies do they employ when opportunities for race talk emerge?

Portraiture

To answer these research questions, I used a qualitative form of narrative known as portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). My unique position as a researcher and practitioner within my research setting led me to seek a method that values relationships, rapport, and voice. Thus, portraiture was a good choice.

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, a sociologist and Harvard professor, developed the qualitative method known as portraiture, and she describes the process of creating portraits as the blending of art and science. She characterizes it as a process that "requires vigilance to empirical description *and* aesthetic expression. It is a careful, deliberate process and a highly creative one" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 12). There is a rich history of scholars who championed the intersection of aesthetics and empiricism, including Dewey and DuBois, both of whom resisted many of the dominant canons of social science and believed the integration of science and art could uniquely and accurately capture and represent social reality (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, pp. 6-7). Other scholars have noted the power of portraiture, appreciating the ability it provides

researchers to “[embrace] both analytic rigor (a perspective that is distant, discerning, and skeptical) and community building (acts of intimacy and connection)... the scientific facts gathered in the field give voice to the people’s experience (Featherstone, 1989)” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 10). As a result of the researcher’s active interactions with the participants in an attempt to co-create a narrative that resonates with audiences beyond the academy, the investigator’s voice is more visible in this research methodology than in any other research form (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

This methodology feels natural to me for several reasons. First, success in my professional role as an instructional coach is contingent on the development of trusting relationships with teachers, and portraiture, too, requires relationships of trust. Over time and through intimate dialogue, self-reflection, and critique with teachers at various levels of experience, I feel that I have earned the trust of many of our faculty, and portraiture allowed me to build on this important work. A second reason this methodology feels natural to me is because the researcher is more active than passive and plays a central role in the creation of the narratives, or teacher portraits. A primary piece of my job as a coach is to synthesize data and inspire teachers to reflect and refine practices by providing specific, individual feedback. Through observation notes, conversations, and video recordings, I am frequently involved in co-creating “images” of teachers. As teachers take risks, build relationships with students and families, and try new techniques or curriculum, I help them reflect upon and explore their role as teacher more deeply. Sometimes I am directly involved in the work; I may model a strategy, or we may try a technique side by side. Sometimes I observe from the periphery. Sometimes I am called in to consult after the fact. Either way, I watch, listen, note take, and occasionally video record teacher movements, words, and voice as they interact with the content and

the learners. After the lesson, the teacher and I retreat to our own spaces and allow ourselves time to digest the documentation. Then we get together to engage in translation. If I attempted to create the final image, or portrait, of that moment in time without the teacher's input, it would be a partial representation. A full, rich, authentic interpretation emerges only during co-construction, when we both serve as translators. The work is not easy. We respectfully examine experience, context, skill, and perspective during the painting of the picture. As we collaborate, translate, and capture that moment in time, vulnerability, receptivity, and honesty are required, but the conversation is laced with resilience and optimism -- the belief that our translated, imperfect images lead us to new ways of thinking. This work is similar to the approach and work of a portraitist. I consider much of my collaboration with teachers to be a process that bridges science and art. I regularly combine verifiable observations and facts with an aesthetic process of generating a story, or "portrait," about a particular teacher that includes context and voice.

Given the sensitive nature of race talk (Pollock, 2004; Sue, 2015), I also wanted to use a methodology that allows space for a dialectic process, so it also felt natural to connect my investigation of teachers' navigation of race issues in the classroom (informed by their understandings and perceptions about whiteness and race) to "portraiture." Because of my positioning as an instructional coach within the setting where my study occurred, an inquiry into ways teachers navigate race in the classroom could not be separated from an inquiry into my own experiences, so a method in which the researcher was more active than passive seemed fitting. Contrasted to another methodology, ethnography, where the researcher is also embedded in the research setting, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) distinguishes between the two by describing an

ethnographer as someone who listens *to* a story, whereas portraitists listen *for* a story (p. 11). In my research, I was able to use the relationships I have built with teachers over time and my position of "being there" to discern nuances and shape the telling of a complex but resonant story. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) asserts, "This does not mean that [the researcher] directs the drama or constructs the scenes. It *does* mean that the narrator participates in identifying and selecting the story and helps shape the story's coherence and aesthetic" (p. 11). As teachers and I collaborated to translate interview data, and co-created portraits that capture one's essence as a white educator, I wanted the teachers in my study to

> experience the portraits as both familiar and exotic so that in reading them, they [will] be introduced to a perspective that they had not considered before. And finally, I [want] the subject to feel 'seen' ... fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, and scrutinized. I [want] them to feel both the discovery and generosity of the process as well as the penetrating and careful investigation. (p. 6)

Before presenting the finished portrait, which included my analysis, to each teacher in my study, I shared a story with them, borrowed from one that Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) told of being the subject of a painted portrait and the lessons she learned about perspective and the power of the medium from that experience (pp. 3-5). I proposed to each teacher that they consider my written portrait in the same way one might consider a painted one. Once unveiled, a painting more than likely would not capture them exactly as they see themselves in a mirror. They would presumably see that the artist captured something beyond a surface image -- a translation more "probing, layered, and interpretive" (p. 4). I guaranteed them that they would see themselves in my portrait, that much would be familiar. But I informed them that they may also see a version of themselves that differs from their self-perception -- possibly some unfamiliar

interpretations which could evoke discomfort and possibly trigger defensiveness. I ended my introduction to their portraits by handing over a hard copy, feeling a bit vulnerable myself, sharing that my ultimate hope was that the portrait felt honest and representative. Then I sent them on their way to read and contemplate their portrait but invited future conversation about it. Soliciting their feedback informed my analysis, reinforced trust, and lent credibility to the project.

A third reason I decided to use portraiture to analyze data and present findings was influenced, I believe, by the artist in me. As a modern dancer in my youth, I found the process of using my body as an instrument to transmit a story stirring and inspiring. Piecing together sequences of technical movements (achieved through discipline and rigorous training), marrying them with music, and later weaving costumes and lighting into the theme to complete and enhance the telling of the story was a rich, inventive, gratifying experience. As age usurps my flexibility, speed, and strength, I have discovered a similar creative inspiration in quilting. The process of laying out a mound of random, disconnected scrap pieces of fabric - a full spectrum of colors, patterns, and textures - and connecting them to create a beautiful, useful whole object, is captivating. In my mind, conducting research is a lot like making art. I experience reeling anticipation knowing that within some voluminous pile of words (data) there is something beautiful and stimulating waiting to be discovered… formed… shared.

Besides aligning well with my current job and professional passion for supporting teachers, the current achievement-driven climate in schools and policymakers' propensity to document and report failure rather than success, leads me to appreciate researchers' attempts through portraiture to "search for goodness" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Conclusions about students' experiences, progress, and growth in public schools

today tilt dramatically towards quantitative, positivistic, evidence-based methods and often ignore context, perspective, and voice. The story quantitative data presents of schools, achievement, and teachers often feels reductive and narrow. It leaves out important parts, lacks authenticity, and fails to tell the entire story of what happens in schools among policymakers, administrators, teachers, and students. Portraiture challenges the over-reliance on quantitative data as well as current research practices in social sciences that aim to identify problems within a setting and then prescribe possible "fixes" or cures (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). Portraiture seeks to address this imbalance, to move beyond what Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) explains as the traditional social science method that focuses on "pathology and disease rather than health and resilience" (p. 8). Portraiture is characterized by a search for goodness, one that looks for strengths within an institution and within individuals. Expressions of goodness are not without imperfections, but "the researcher who asks first, 'what is good here?' is likely to absorb a very different reality than the one who is on a mission to discover the source of failure" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 9). Let me be clear that the goal of portraiture is not to make excuses, depict a false image of perfection, or focus on only the positive. White teachers have a lot of challenging work to do in the area of race consciousness and the navigation of race talk. "Portraitists examine the ways in which subjects meet, negotiate, and overcome challenges" (Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005, p. 18). It is in this vein that I wish to examine "goodness."

Defining "Goodness"

I have the privilege of interacting with teachers and students daily within multiple classrooms at my school. I see various styles and techniques for interaction and instruction, but there is one common instructional tool used across all classrooms... talk.

And teachers talk a lot. Teachers control the language and interactions in the classroom, language that, according to Shor (2009), plays a powerful role in revealing and reinscribing social order.

> The way we speak and are spoken to help shape us into the people we become. Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us. The world addresses us to produce the different identities we carry forward into life: men are addressed differently than are women, people of color differently to whites, elite students differently than those from working families. Yet, though language is fateful in teaching us what kind of people to become and what kind of society to make, discourse is not destiny. We can redefine ourselves and remake society. (Introduction, para. 1, 2)

It is the final sentence in this citation that best captures my search for goodness. Goodness, in the context of my study, is marked by a willingness to engage in redefining oneself and remaking society, even though the process may be unsteady, messy, and ambiguous. Since the term, *goodness*, connotes a bias towards seeing only the positive, the context of this study warrants a change in terminology. I have decided that *mindfulness*, rather than goodness, more accurately expresses what I am looking for: a white teacher's openness to critique and willingness to explore her ongoing, imperfect development in racial identity. Langer (as cited in Rich & Cargile, 2004), defines mindfulness as having "three characteristics: (1) creating new categories; (2) being open to new information; and (3) being aware of more than one perspective" (p. 361). Mindfulness requires a recognition that race is contradictory, contextual, and regulated by social norms. Mindfulness is hard work for white teachers who struggle to resist the intuitive, mind*less* urge to habitually follow dominant scripts and norms reinforced by white mainstream culture (Rich & Cargile, 2004). In the pursuit of mindfulness, the portraitist works from a critical but generous vantage point and paints with a palette that includes a mix of lightness and darkness, strength and vulnerability, inertia and agency.

“By focusing on what works, on underscoring what is healthy and strong, we inevitably see the dark shadows of compromise, inhibition, and imperfection” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 142). Teachers who show mindfulness will make mistakes, feel discomfort, hesitate, reflect, question, compromise, and conform as they explore racial identity and its impact on their work. They will not be models of perfection, but they will offer important insight regarding race consciousness and white identity and the navigation of race in elementary classrooms.

Researcher Positionality

I am a white, female educator who has served as an instructional coach the past four years at the elementary school where I conducted this study. Prior to that, I was an elementary teacher in the same district for ten years but in a different school. In my current role, I collaborate primarily with teachers in grades 3-5, often about instructional strategies, but in response to slashed textbook budgets in our state and the introduction of Common Core in 2010, as well as a revised retooling of Common Core standards that went into effect in fall 2018, I also work with our professional learning teams (PLTs) on designing curriculum -- creating units of study that cover the Common Core and state standards educators are expected to teach each year for their assigned grade level. Shortly after my arrival at Holly Hill Elementary School (pseudonym) as an instructional coach, our district administration “bundled” Common Core and state standards and mandated that teachers follow the new, district-developed pacing guide for those standards. This means that the district dictates *when* to teach specific standards but leaves unit design; lesson sequencing; and resource collection, curation, and purchasing up to PLTs. Teachers and instructional coaches have been given the responsibility of pulling what resources they can find to design and construct most of the curriculum units

to cover standards in Reading, Writing, Science, and Social Studies. As I sit with PLTs, I am acutely aware of how this task feels. While it is a relief in many ways to not be pinned down to a scripted curriculum, being awarded the "freedom to design our own" translates to fewer curricular resources from the district and a host of challenges related to time. Building curriculum from scratch, deciding on the trajectory of a unit, and locating and vetting resources takes an inordinate amount of planning time, time that detracts from collegial conversations about learners and specific delivery of instruction. Additionally, the curriculum and expectations for teachers (state and district ones) change every year and are typically shared with staff just a few days before the new school year gets underway, making it difficult to adjust, plan, and implement changes as one prepares to meet a new batch of students. A work in progress, many units have taken shape under time constraints, often resulting in adoption of standardized curriculum, with critical literacy and multiple viewpoints often absent from the mix. The new units, created in-house and under pressure, continue to be revisited and tweaked year to year when time allows, but they also tend to reflect the racial makeup of the teaching staff (77% white) and common Eurocentric content. Our student population is more diverse – almost exactly 50% white and 50% students of color. The cultural mismatch between curriculum and our general student population is rarely discussed, possibly because of the pressure of increased teacher responsibilities and the challenge to follow an unforgiving pacing guide, but I believe it may also go unseen or unmentioned due to the racial makeup of the teaching staff.

My interest in critical literacy began when I enrolled in a racial equity workshop through an organization called Dismantling Racism Works (drWorks) in 2013. It was a transformative experience for me and altered my thinking about race, institutionalized

racism, and the way I see and interact with my students and colleagues. Before taking the course, I felt I traversed social barriers with a high level of success. I was recognized by colleagues and administrators as an educator capable of creating strong relationships with marginalized students and their families. But continued self-study allowed me to critically assess and spot areas for personal and professional growth. As a classroom teacher, I felt that nurturing critical literacy was a clear way to incorporate race and social power structures into content. Critical literacy is defined as the ability to read text or listen to spoken word in a manner that promotes deeper understanding of socially constructed concepts such as power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships (McLaughlin & DeVoodg, 2004). It helps readers realize that there are many ways of thinking about and understanding a topic and that the author has explained it in just *one* way. Teachers who teach critical literacy help students of all ages become active users rather than passive reproducers of the ideas in a text (McLaughlin & DeGoodv, 2004) with the goal of extending comprehension beyond the author's message and the printed word on the page. Students learn to interrogate the text and comprehend from a critical stance. More often viewed as a skill to teach middle and high school students (if at all), I feel elementary school is a perfect time to introduce and teach critical literacy.

In the process of transferring the teachings from Dismantling Racism and my interest in critical literacy to my instructional coach position at Holly Hill, I have witnessed some enthusiasm for broadening curriculum and classroom conversation but also some reluctance, resistance, indifference, and disengagement from several colleagues. On one occasion during planning, a teacher announced to her PLT, "We just can't teach about social justice again and again. We've already taught that this year." Relationships built on mutual respect and trust, along with years of district-wide discussion about the

achievement gap and equity in schools, have created some opportunities for staff at our school, including me, to speak freely and honestly about reluctance or lack of confidence related to addressing race at school. I believe the development of positive relationships and trust over time positioned me well to solicit honest conversation from participants in this study about the complex topic of race and equity. The collaborative work I am involved in at the school, which includes leading whole-school professional development sessions as well as small group and individual instructional coaching on a variety of topics, has helped me establish credibility with our staff, and I believe most teachers at my school see me as an "in the trenches" support person. My insider role allowed me to "capture unspoken rules, routine actions, and social calculations that happen below the level of conscious thought" (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 77), which contributed to the rich portraits I share in the next three chapters.

Potential conflicts that might have resulted because of my position at the research site included being viewed by a few teachers as an administrator-like evaluator. Although I establish agendas and set goals for PLTs based on data and the needs of students and teachers, lead professional development, and visit many classrooms, I do not formally evaluate teachers. Even so, I have witnessed a few teachers casually referring to me as though I am an upper-tier member of our administrative hierarchy, rather than describing me as an equal partner in the classroom. While this is an inaccurate depiction of the instructional coach model in our district, a teacher who perceives me in this way could have been reluctant to engage in open and truthful dialogue about the complex, often emotional, topic of race and instead be persuaded to respond the way they *think* they should. Then again, a white teacher may feel very comfortable sharing thoughts about race, seeing me as relatable and safe. White-on-

white research allows more room for whites to slip into *white lies* and justify their positionality. Taking this into consideration, I was careful and thoughtful in my selection of participants.

Participant Selection

In my study, I specifically focus on white educators. This group reflects the majority of the teaching workforce in America (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013) and comprises the majority of the teaching workforce at the research site (77%). Many scholars claim that white teachers bear the greatest responsibility for disrupting whiteness and eliminating racism and racial disparities between white students and students of color (DiAngelo, 2016; Sue 2015). It is with that spirit and curiosity that I wanted to create portraits of three white teachers from the school where I work, a school where the staff has shown commitment to equity work in various ways: through the creation of an on-site Equity Team; school-wide participation in professional development around race; and implementation of restorative practices which derived from an equity audit on discipline referrals that showed disproportionalities, with students of color being cited more often for disciplinary infractions than white students. In an effort to deeply explore the experiences of teachers engaged in self-analysis and critical assessment of their practices, I kept the sample size to three. Participants had to meet all of the criteria I outline below to participate in the research.

First, each participant has four or more years of experience. I selected experienced teachers because research reveals that white, pre-service teachers often struggle to bridge university coursework about race and culturally diverse students to their classroom practicums and student teaching experiences. In several studies, white pre-service teachers described diversity coursework in college as helpful in gaining

awareness about race, but claimed it served no practical purpose in the classroom (Daniel, 2016; Miller, 2017; Picower, 2009). They viewed culturally responsive pedagogy as separate to the delivery of content. Sadly, much of the work that goes into building teacher knowledge about race and culturally responsive pedagogy has unfairly fallen on colleges and universities and fails to continue once pre-service teachers join the profession (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Daniel, 2016; Picower, 2009; Segall & Garrett, 2013). New teachers are juggling an abundance of new learning related to the students, the curriculum, relationships with colleagues, and classroom management, for a start, so a study of them would not contribute greatly to my research interests. My observations from the field have led me to believe that new teachers are often too overwhelmed to unpack their own socialization and think metacognitively about their own biases, teaching beliefs, and behaviors, opting to expend energy on “survival skills” like learning the curriculum and classroom management techniques. Experience, of course, does not guarantee racial consciousness and culturally sensitive interactions, but teachers with more experience tend to operate less from a sense of survival and urgency and can pull from a more robust repertoire of lesson ideas and management strategies. By year four in the classroom, teachers usually feel more confident with “the basics,” plus they have worked with a larger number and variety of students and families across years. Reaching this level of experience makes them more likely to have at least considered their participation and role in cultural understanding and meeting the needs of some of their diverse learners.

In the same way that a novice teacher potentially impedes an investigation that aims to uncover ways that white teachers navigate race issues in the classroom, there is no doubt that a white teacher who expresses sincere disbelief, or possibly even denies

racism, would severely impede gathering meaningful information on this topic. Since the goal of my study was to learn about ways white teachers navigate race issues, though the journey be unsteady, purposeful sampling had to include the selection of teachers who show mindfulness -- they demonstrate behaviors that indicate that they self-reflect, are open to critique, and are instrumental advocates for change. Examples of how I determined mindfulness include joining the Equity Team and helping design and deliver professional development to the staff; advocating for more diverse books in classroom libraries; or being recognized by the administration for parent engagement, and/or being noticed by an instructional coach for intentional planning -- showing a desire to include multiple perspectives and counternarratives during instruction.

I also used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2016) to select mindful teachers who represented three distinct bands, or areas, of elementary education: K-2 (early elementary); 3-5 (upper elementary); and a Specials teacher (a P.E., Art, Music, or World Language teacher) who serves the entire student population. This strategic decision originated from research that suggests that race talk more often happens with students in middle and high school. Discussions of race at the elementary level is often ignored or avoided by teachers (Bolgatz, 2005). I thought it would be interesting and informative to include participants from early and upper elementary grades as well as a teacher who teaches every grade level (K-5) to see if the age of student or subjects taught played a role in teachers choosing race-related concepts or topics for investigation in the classroom. It was not my goal, however, to overgeneralize what these white teachers said about navigating race in the classroom, a risk associated with such a small sample size.

Finally, each of the participants have completed a district mandated professional development course on equity (at least the first level). Completion of the course ensured exposure to foundational language and concepts related to race, the history of racism, and some familiarity with culturally responsive instructional strategies.

Data Collection

A rigorous qualitative study makes use of multiple data sources. Researchers must keep in mind that "Data are not 'out there' waiting collection...they have to be noticed by the researcher" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 106). Saldana (2014) likens a researcher to a "human camera...zooming out to capture the broad landscape of your field site one day, then zooming in on a particularly interesting individual or phenomenon the next" (p. 4). I used three sequenced, semi-structured interviews with each teacher as my primary data collection strategy to "zoom in and out" as I completed my study. Although I did not do systematic observations as part of my research process, it is important to note that I drew material from my everyday observations in the school as an instructional coach. I have worked with these teachers several years and know them well professionally. I used informal observation information as a supplement to support the creation of portraits.

Interviews

For data collection, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with each of the three research participants, as well as a brief "member check interview" after each main interview. The time between the main interview and the member check interview allowed participants an opportunity to review the transcript and reflect. The main interview can be characterized as researcher-centered; I asked questions and teachers responded. The member check interview created a different dynamic, an exchange that afforded

teachers a great deal of control since they were not in response-mode but rather reporting salient observations from their perspective. One open-ended prompt: *Read and reflect. What was the most salient piece or aspect of your interview?*, resulted in a free flow exchange of ideas, observations, and wonderings. This interview structure lent itself nicely to the co-construction of portraits, because often the member check interview resulted in reflective statements and extensions of previous conversations which simultaneously informed the portrait writing, taking it beyond what I would have written based on the main interview alone.

I used an interview protocol and an interview guide to engage participants in conversation. “Good interview questions are those that are open-ended and yield descriptive data, even stories, about the phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 120). A semi-structured interview format shaped the interview sessions. The open-ended questions in my interview guide allowed some flexibility, like the reordering of questions to keep conversation flowing and using probes and follow-up questions to clarify and further explore answers. I designed the first interview in the sequence to explore teachers’ backgrounds and lived experiences and ways such experiences have shaped their racial identity and their construction of race. As I outlined and constructed my interview guide, I intentionally avoided questions about classroom pedagogy and the participants’ roles as teachers during the initial interview for several reasons: 1) as a strategy to organize data collection, 2) to focus meticulously on context, and 3) to make the opening conversation in the 3-part interview series feel less formal -- less about formal training and pedagogy and more about getting to know the participant. To facilitate conversation about background and establish some personal context in the initial interview, I selected and adapted some of the “Racial Autobiography Questions”

from *Courageous Conversations* (Singleton & Linton, 2006), because these questions were designed to explore personal racial identity development, experiences linked to race, and personal context. Creswell (2016) reminds us that qualitative researchers

> are not only interested in how people talk about things, we are also interested in how their particular setting or context shapes what they have to say… The context may be their families, their friends, their homes, or many other contexts...Context or setting is very important in qualitative research. (p. 6)

Originally, I envisioned and created a two-part interview sequence during which I addressed personal experiences and background during Interview # 1 with a plan to jump to classroom pedagogy - strategies teachers use to handle race talk at school - during Interview #2. I changed that plan after I conducted a pilot study, in part to assess my interview guide. The teacher-participant in the pilot study was a former colleague: a self-reflective, experienced educator committed to social justice education, someone who has exhibited mindfulness over the years by showing an openness to critique, a curiosity about status quo education, and an interest in disrupting whiteness in schools. She was well known among colleagues for building strong relationships with families of color. I collected a lot of valuable information during Interview #1 of the pilot study. However, reflection afterwards made me feel like I needed a "bridge" interview, something between conversations about family background/lived experiences and pedagogical strategies, which led me to create another interview guide, which resulted in the following sequence

Part 1: questions related to family background and understandings about race

Part 2: (bridge) questions about how and when race talk arises in the school setting

Part 3: strategies teachers employ to facilitate and manage race talk

The open-endedness of the questions invited a lot of description, plus (as I did for Interviews 1 and 3), I included several follow-up or probing questions to the bridge interview in anticipation of gathering more details, clarifying information, and/or encouraging deeper thinking (see Appendix A for semi-structured interview guides). Most of my question stems for Interview #2 asked the teacher to describe scenarios at school in which race was perceived to be an important factor in the interaction or event. My pilot study participant, Abby, provided detailed information and examples that spoke to the culture of the school, which provided insightful information about context which helped me to shape the interview guide for this bridge interview. Interview #2 proved to be a wise addition and particularly important for my study since the context of the Rockwell Heights district is unique. I was unable to locate studies that hinted to the significance of a district equity plan. It was far more common to read about individual teachers or small cohorts of teachers banding together to enact social justice teaching, sometimes with support from their undergraduate professors, but rare to read about teachers supported through a whole district effort and an equity plan that encourages teachers to interrogate whiteness and to utilize culturally responsive practices. Spending time exploring context was worthwhile and dovetailed nicely into Interview #3 where I asked questions that pertained to pedagogy, specifically teachers' professional training, instructional practices, and use of curriculum.

Before conducting any interviews for my dissertation, I reviewed documents required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) with each participant, obtained their written consent, and provided them with a copy of all forms. IRB documents serve to instill trust between researcher and participant and help ensure that the rights and welfare of human subjects are protected. I interviewed the participants at separate times

and in separate settings. I audio recorded each interview using my cell phone, but also wrote notes, documenting additional elements of the interview that attracted my attention, including the participants' non-verbal communication. All data collection occurred within real-life contexts with the goal of listening *for* a story about "how people talk about things...describe things, and how they see the world" (Creswell, 2016, p. 6). My interview questions allowed me to capture and document perspectives rarely heard when discussing pervasive silence about race in schools, those of white, mindful elementary teachers in a diverse, suburban school.

Each of the interviews in the 3-part sequence lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. I transcribed the audio-recorded data shortly following each one. Once an interview was transcribed, I gave a copy of the transcript to the participant, provided a prompt for reflection, and immediately scheduled our member check session, which was also audio-recorded. I intentionally chose an open-ended reflection prompt to avoid leading the conversation in any particular direction. The prompt was: *Read and reflect. What was the most salient piece or aspect of your interview?* Although shorter in length than the three main interviews in the sequence, the "member check interviews" offered the participants and me opportunities to ask questions, elaborate on statements, or clarify ideas. I audio-recorded all three member check interview sessions too. The reflective member check interviews captured small and significant details. If a participant, for example, noted a discrepancy in my any of the transcripts (perhaps the wrong job title or wrong number of siblings), we corrected those errors then. I did not, however, anticipate how valuable the reflective/member check interviews would be in the creation of the portraits. Providing the whole interview transcript and a period for reflection generated meaningful follow-up discussion and nudged compelling revelations

to the surface. Often after “seeing” their responses, in hard copy format, participants would share discomfort, surprises, and other pieces of information. I only asked that they read through the interview transcript, reflect, and come to the member check sessions ready to share the most salient theme or understanding they derived from reviewing their transcript. Because they are all mindful teachers, they took this task to heart and shared not only one salient piece, from their perspective, but they also pointed to multiple areas of the interview where they noticed their own discomfort and/or lack of clarity. Sometimes they came to the member check interviews with new understandings as well. One participant, for example, had touted her mother’s work with immigrant families during the main interview, but upon reflection recognized the rescue mentality, or white saviorism, that had unknowingly been modeled by her mom. Another example of new understandings occurred when one of the participants noticed that she struggled to make definitive statements during the first interview, characterizing her responses as vague and talking in circles. She wondered if her ambiguity was a reflection of whiteness. I noticed, after she made that observation, that she was more direct in the interviews that followed, and her answers contained greater detail.

Data Analysis

Many decisions must be made by a researcher once she approaches the data. My data analysis happened in two larger phases. Phase 1 was an individual-centered approach, which enabled me to write individual teacher portraits, and Phase 2 was group-centered, a comparative analysis across all three teachers’ interview sets. I define an “interview set” as the teacher’s main interview as well as her follow-up member check interview. I treated the main interview transcript and the associated member check interview transcript as one connected document. At the completion of all interviews,

there were three interview sets per teacher, and each set corresponded to one part of the interview sequence: Part 1 - family background, Part 2 - how and when race issues arise in elementary school, and Part 3 - pedagogical strategies to manage race talk. My initial coding focused on one teacher at a time and one part of the interview sequence at a time. For example, I read over a teacher's "interview set" for Part 1 (family background) and looked for words and short phrases that helped me assign an attribute, or code, to a datum. I followed the same procedure at the completion of Part 2 and Part 3 of the interview sequence. Using Saldana's (2014) tree/forest analogy, the codes were the *trees*; they helped make retrieval of pieces of data easier and assisted me in identifying patterns worthy of future investigation. Initial coding included words like: discomfort, tracked classes, curriculum, silence, etc. Once initial coding occurred for an interview part, I looked for connections and patterns across and between codes. I then inductively clustered codes into broader categories, "extended phrases or sentences that summarize the manifest (apparent) and latent (underlying) meanings of data" (p. 31). These extended phrases illuminated themes, or the *forest*, for each of the teachers. Initial themes that emerged from transcripts included: racial isolation, individualism/meritocracy, parents undermining equity efforts, professional development, intentional pedagogical moves, struggle with complicity, transgressive thinking, and support systems. I remained focused on one teacher at a time, re-reading that teacher's three interview sets and associated codes several times to seek clarity of themes. Following this procedure helped me listen *for* a story and create individual portraits. I created one teacher portrait, in its entirety, before moving to the next participant.

The co-creation of the portrait, a signature piece of portraiture methodology, occurred primarily during the member check interview as the participant and I advanced

our separate views or “takes” on the main interviews, sharing what we perceived to be the most salient and striking aspects of the interaction. I allude to the value of the member check interview in the Data Collection section where I describe my interview structure. My experiences as an instructional coach engaging in coach cycles with teachers led me to structure interviews in this way. I had imagined that, during the member check interview, the participant and I would be struck or moved in different ways and by different components of the transcript. This proved to be true. Sharing control of the interview process (with me leading the main interview and the teacher guiding the member check interview) not only ensured trustworthiness but also contributed to the thick description used in the portraits by nudging compelling revelations to the surface. Many portraits could have been drawn, or created, from the data collected. Given this reality, the portraitist, according to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), has to perform a balancing act as she aims for resonance with three audiences:

> ...with the actors who will see themselves reflected in the story, with the readers who will see no reason to disbelieve it, and with the portraitist herself, whose deep knowledge of the setting and self-critical stance allow her to see the ‘truth value’ in her work. (p. 247)

The separate pieces (stories, reflections, and observations) brought forth from each interview set, including data collected during member checks, provided thick, descriptive data. As I wrote each portrait, I considered it my job to obscure the separate “pieces” from the reader through the “invisibility of seams” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 274).

> Enriched by carefully constructed *context*, expressed through thoughtfully modulated *voice*, informed by cautiously guarded *relationships*, and organized into scrupulously selected *themes*, the research portrait is the result of a seamless synthesis of rigorous procedures that unite in an expressive aesthetic whole. (p. 274)

Beyond simply sharing the stories of mindful, race conscious teachers, I created portraits that I hoped would serve as a vehicle to inspire and transform.

The second phase of data analysis was more group-centered and required explicit thematizing across all three portraits. I read across the completed portraits and reviewed coded themes to locate similarities and differences in narratives and to code and construct larger, overarching themes that explain what can be learned when considering the portraits as a whole. Some of the larger themes that emerged were:

- Silence about race occurred regardless of family structure, income status, or geography
- Race was a taboo topic in each family, yet covert messages about race were communicated and understood; families practiced elements of Bonilla-Silva's (2018) *New Racism,* or smiling discrimination
- Mindful teachers are willing to explore, scrutinize, and dissect their socialization histories
- Race talk can be done well with young children
- Workplace setting is a major factor influencing their intentionality and use of CRSP
- Mindful teachers navigate race in different ways

As a portraitist, I was listening *for* a story rather than *to* a story throughout the entire process. In my role as interpreter, I tried to add the "why" something happened to "what" was described. Moving back and forth between codes (trees) and themes (forest) to analyze connections and relationships and interpret findings led me to inferences, theories, an accessible story for the reader, and ultimately, answers to my research questions.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Qualitative research represents a holistic, multidimensional approach to uncovering how people perceive and construct their worlds. Qualitative researchers must ensure that their representations accurately convey those perceptions and constructions and that they have conducted their investigation in an ethical manner. Ethical practices are important in establishing trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I engaged in this study first by deliberately examining my position, assumptions, and biases and how they could affect the study. I worked thoughtfully so that my interactions with participants could be described as “caring, conscious reflexivity” (Rallis & Rossman, 2010, p. 496) in an effort to do no harm. The following strategies helped me ensure trustworthiness.

Informed Consent

As part of the IRB process, I informed participants of the purpose of the study and their participation rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. I also explained how their identity, as well as the identity of their school and school district, would be protected through the use of pseudonyms. As mentioned earlier, I obtained written consent prior to audio recording each interview session.

Reflexivity

The IRB process is perceived by many people as serving a critical role in qualitative research, but Rallis and Rossman (2010) express concern when IRB documents alone are considered the only source of ethical action, as these are mostly a set of procedures that must be checked off prior to engaging in research. They have interacted with and studied many student researchers who failed to take IRB documents

seriously (p. 496). According to them, what makes research choices ethical is not simply following a set of procedures. Rather, ethical decisions

> are a product of reflexive moral reasoning. Since people – human beings – are central to social science research, the participants and the researcher are morally interdependent. Recognizing this connection, the ethical and competent researcher cares about her participants; she builds and explores relationships that honor the humanity and well-being of her participants. (p. 498)

I work with the teachers in my study, and I have an interest in maintaining supportive, trusting relationships with my colleagues. I ensured trustworthiness by engaging in caring reflexivity. I investigated this important research topic and created portraits of participants with the hope that my work helps reveal ways that the participants and I both benefit from the privilege of whiteness and ways we can, and should, challenge it. I remained focused on ethics and principles and scrutinized my written representations to ensure accuracy, respect, and mutual benefit. In addition to member checks after my participants had a chance to read each interview transcript, which provided a transparent process for discussing observations and concerns, I also extended an invitation for portrait feedback once I shared the final portrait draft, including the analysis with each teacher.

As a person who identifies racially as white and shows interest in examining and deconstructing race, particularly whiteness, I worked diligently to remain aware that race was always operating in every interaction. Even though I was studying race and trying to make sense of whiteness, I needed to remind myself, throughout the dissertation process, that I experience the world from a position of privilege, which puts limits on my scope of inquiry. There was a danger in believing I could distance myself from the experiences of the white teachers in my study under an assumption that my research

understandings, thus far, and interest in social justice elevated me to a status of "knowing." My own socialization history caused intermittent ruptures in my intellectual, ethical, and moral understandings of race and racism, just as it did, at times, for the mindful teachers in my study.

I grew up in the South, the daughter of a truck driver and an elementary school teaching assistant, occupations typically associated with working class status, although long-distance trucking, in the 1970s, was one path to middle class. Extended support from my grandparents, including the gift of family land, ensured that our family of five lived more of a middle-class lifestyle. The messages I received about race throughout my childhood were both overt and covert, and racism was normalized. I witnessed my parents' and grandparents' outward extensions of kindness to people of color in our neighborhood (donations of food and clothes, help with physical labor, carpooling, as well as casual friendly interactions with families of color at school events,) paired with de facto apartheid practiced within the privacy of our home. Contradictions abounded. My best friend throughout elementary school was a girl of mixed race (Native American and Black), and she was accepted and treated like family. On the other hand, when I wanted to date a new student at my high school, a white male who was rumored to have dated a black female at his old school, my parents disapproved. The competing messages - outward kindness and private discrimination – created, at times, a cognitive dissonance. There is historical context connected to my parents' views. I remember a familiar story about a painful event that occurred in the early 1970s when the trucking industry had been ordered to hire a more diverse pool of drivers. My father was a union driver who had been laid off of work the week before my parents were closing on their newly built house. Desperate for work, my dad applied at a local trucking firm. According to my dad,

the supervisor told him he could not hire any white drivers until a certain number of black drivers had been hired. They could, however, offer him a job training inexperienced black drivers. He summarizes the event this way, “I was an experienced driver denied employment because of MY skin color.” The stress my father felt then is evident in his voice even today, as is his resentment about “losing a position to an unqualified black man.” When we discuss this, I validate the pain and the fear he experienced as he faced losing a house and financial resources to support his wife and three young children. When I suggest the flip side, however, that for too many years to count, black men, who also wanted to support their families, had been turned away from employment opportunities because of the color of their skin, my invitation to explore this phenomenon and its connections to racism always results in irritation and shutdown. His anger and allegations of injustice lose traction when I challenge him to consider why he was silent about injustice when black men were deprived of opportunities but was quick to label his exclusion from hiring as “reverse racism.” My dad cannot, or will not, make that cognitive leap. In my family, below the surface of kind gestures, was an unspoken and unquestioned superiority. We were not, however, racists. Because of our visible good deeds, we were generous, “good whites.”

Even though I have an intellectual understanding of critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, I will always grapple with race and power from a position of privilege. As Freire (1993) suggests, those who are in oppressed positionalities see the system of oppression more clearly than those, like me, in the oppressor position. Numerous times, throughout my research, I stepped back and scrutinized my own reactions and responses to race, as well as to the teachers in my study, deliberately and repetitively reminding myself that we live in a

racialized world and my experiences, ideology, and emotions were also shaped by the hegemony of whiteness.

Member Checks

To prevent misconceptions from entering and influencing data interpretation, I ensured authentic representation of participants' comments by engaging participants in member checks following each of the main interviews. This strategy involved sharing interview transcripts with research participants and providing time for them to review our exchanges. To ensure accurate representation of participants, I welcomed follow up conversations to discuss perceived misconceptions and/or to provide space for clarifications and additions. As the primary researcher obtaining information, it was imperative that I identified and addressed any misunderstandings to ensure accuracy. The teachers and I, through reflective member check interviews, which were also audio-recorded, identified what we perceived to be the most salient and striking aspects of each interaction. Participant input and observations regarding descriptions of events, behaviors, feelings, and reactions informed the co-construction of the portraits. As I listened for a story, their salient reflections helped it take form. I also shared final portraits, including my analysis, with each teacher and invited feedback. Allison never commented on her portrait, even though I checked in with her a couple of times before school closed for summer break, expressing my interest in her assessment. I was disappointed that she had nothing to say, but not completely surprised. I suspected that she would be embarrassed about some of her responses as well as some of my analysis and would avoid further confrontation. Claire and Brooke responded positively to their portraits, indicating that it made them think deeply about their practice and gave them direction regarding areas in which they can stretch and grow. Both of these teachers

expressed gratitude for the time and effort that I put into analyzing and writing their stories.

The process of coding and identifying themes and eventually moving to the co-creation of an aesthetic whole, or a complete portrait, is described by Lawrence-Lightfoot as “more than a graceful compilation of random reflections, personal views, and interactions with individuals and sites” (p. 263). The co-creation unfolded much like coaching cycles at my school do, a process that requires a trusting partnership. The teacher participant and I reviewed each interview transcript privately and separately before coming together to discuss it during member checks. In the same way that I send teachers off to watch their teaching video with open-ended prompts or guiding questions to consider, I followed similar procedures, only I provided just one open-ended question: *Read and reflect. What was the most salient piece or aspect of your interview?* This prompt led us to do some reflection and note taking, some informal coding, before coming together to discuss what we had noticed.

Limitations

Since this study focuses on a small number of teachers from the same school, it presents a narrow scope. The viewpoints uncovered are not representative of all white teachers in the school or district; therefore, it is not generalizable to broader populations. Also, because portraiture allows the researcher to be more active than passive in the research process and the reporting of findings, my subjectivities, experiences, and perspectives shaped the final portraits. Another person’s perspective could have yielded different interpretations and portraits.

Addressed in detail earlier, “searching for goodness,” a central component of the methodology of portraiture, could be characterized by some people as a limitation

because the phrase evokes an idealized, Pollyanna-like picture of perfection and dangerously suggests *good intentions*, a justification used too often by “nice” white people to absolve themselves from responsibility regarding oppression and inequities. To confront tensions that surface when one merges a *search for goodness* with critical whiteness studies, a theoretical framework that speaks directly to the malignant, destructive effects and consequences of white privilege, I explored several ideas and selected a replacement term for the phrase and a more nuanced notion of goodness -- *mindfulness*. Some readers may, however, challenge the coexistence of mindfulness and critical whiteness studies, seeing only contradiction. I argue that the two have the potential of working in tandem, and that any tensions that emerged for me during analysis, interpretation, and explanation served as valuable forms of data that provided beneficial information to the readers of the research. My final chapter, which follows the presentation of the three teacher portraits, captures three white teachers exhibiting honesty and an openness to critique as they grapple with the messiness of racism, reluctantly contemplating their complicity in perpetuating whiteness. All the while, they remain critically hopeful that their unsteady journey brings about change, establishes the usefulness of working towards mindfulness, and shows the potential mindfulness yields for dismantling racism and creating equitable schools.

Organization of Findings

In the next three chapters, I present the portraits of the three teachers: Allison, Claire, and Brooke. Based on the data collected, it is clear that all three teachers are concerned and passionate about changing the current conditions of education and making schools engaging, empowering, and equitable places for teaching and learning. They are change agents. Each person has a solid understanding of what it means to be

a critical teacher; however, the stories they tell illustrate diverse and complex journeys. Although their navigations of race include multiple influences and approaches, as well as periods of confidence and uncertainty, I discovered that each teacher navigated race in a particular way.

Allison's equity journey is characterized by unsteady racial consciousness. She shows warmth and empathy to all of her students, guided by a genuine desire for each child to feel respected and empowered at school; however, some of her confidence and judgment wavers when she interacts with friends outside of school.

A deep thinker, Claire appears to have a very sophisticated understanding of race and racism. Driven by a need to know, her equity journey is marked by consistent questioning. Her cerebral, scholarly approach is underpinned by a vast amount of academic knowledge. She translates theories and ideas from articles, books, and blogs into powerful lessons and conversations for her young students, but she expresses feeling paralyzed sometimes in her decision-making as she tries to figure out best practices and how to be a supportive, not performative, ally.

Brooke, too, is very knowledgeable about race and culturally responsive practices. She is willing to open herself up to critical, painful self-reflection as she examines ways that she has benefited from white privilege and how that privilege shapes her perception of school and interactions with students. She refers numerous times to the value of her school support network and prefers to navigate race collaboratively. She seeks feedback regularly from colleagues as she tests ideas and strategies.

In chapter 7, I provide a comparative analysis around patterns and themes that emerged across all three portraits, but that process would have been cumbersome (for

me and the reader) had I not stopped to think through and analyze salient themes in each individual portrait as a standalone piece first (even as I hope these themes are evident in the narratives). The theoretical lenses of CRT, CSW, and CRSP helped me conduct an analysis for each teacher portrait individually, a component included at the end of each teacher's portrait but considered a necessary and significant part of the whole portrait. I shared both the descriptive portrait and the associated analysis with each teacher participant. The individual portrait analysis helped me to lay the foundation for the comparative analysis I share in the final chapter.

CHAPTER IV

ALLISON

I arrive at my office door at 7:25 a.m. and see Allison Gardner in the hallway. I toss my bags on my desk and walk down the hall to confirm the meeting place for our first interview. Allison is doing what she does every day as her fifth-grade students arrive -- welcoming each child with a greeting and a smile and, for a few kids, a quick check-in. “Good morning, Ryan, how was your soccer game? So glad you’re back Danisha. We missed you.” When I ask about our meeting location, she leads me into her room where she checks her calendar and confirms the time and place. Before exiting, I stop to notice her students. Upon entry, some children go to their cubby to unpack while others grab a dry erase marker and eagerly begin to answer the question of the day -- a fun, low-stakes question posted on the whiteboard at the front of the room. Several students signal peer attention as they chuckle and add some extra curly cues to their cursive writing while other classmates answer the question using a clever hashtag or an artful sketch with a caption. As more students arrive, the crowd flip flops -- those who have finished the question of the day now head over to their cubbies to unpack while a new crew lays claim to the dry erase markers and participates in this optional activity. A few fifth-graders choose to bypass the whiteboard altogether and instead pull out a folder or Chromebook and continue working on an academic assignment, while a handful of others finish breakfast and socialize before the tardy bell rings.

The classroom setting Allison has created is an extension of her bubbly, positive personality. Her room is clean and orderly and radiates an upbeat, contemporary vibe.

The physical space is doused in natural light, thanks to a wall of windows on one side of the room. Trees that skirt the school grounds stand just a few feet from her windows and help camouflage the school's suburban location. The countertop under the windows is lined with bins and containers affixed with labels that support systems and routines for filing and submitting classwork, but Allison's systems and structures seem more fun than overbearing due to the way she uses amusing bitmojis to add some pop culture fun and levity. I have also seen the same expressive bitmojis attached to the digital resources Allison pushes out to students via Google Classroom. Her avatars communicate positive messages and serve as a visual tool to connect with students and add a personal touch to correspondence.

As a regular visitor to Allison's classroom the last couple of years, I immediately noticed her comfort and interest in technology. This skill set is a perfect match not only for maturing fifth grade students who are becoming more and more intrigued with using technology to connect to the larger world, but also for her 1-to-1 school environment. Every student at Holly Hill Elementary has been assigned a personal Chromebook to be used for classwork and projects, and Allison thoughtfully integrates technology into a variety of activities to enhance the learning experience. In the spirit of student choice, Allison allows her fifth-graders to select the way they wish to document and share what they learn, and students often choose to use digital tools like webpages, videos, stop-motion animation, posters, etc. to display their understandings. Their proficiency with technology is clear and Allison has no problem exploring new digital tools alongside students as a learner herself.

Allison's fifth-graders also take advantage of flexible seating in the classroom, another example of student choice. Throughout the day, they walk their laptops,

notebooks, or novels to various locations within the room where they settle into kid-sized sofas, cushioned benches, mats on the floor, or standing desks. While there is time designated daily for independent work, Allison encourages a lot of partner and group work too. To facilitate frequent transitions, Allison outfitted several milk crates with brightly patterned, cushions. Students arrange these lightweight milk crate stools to configure collaborative groups quickly and easily. Standard classroom desks, clustered to create pods serve as a home base for storing of a variety of instructional materials: folders, books, pencil cases, etc. Students also utilize a “book box,” a portable container for independent reading materials. They fill their book boxes with selections from the school library, but they also enjoy choosing from their robust classroom library, which Allison keeps stocked with a range of diverse authors and current titles using a combination of PTA and personal funds. One thing is clear, Allison Gardner has established routines and an environment that invites student choice and voice while promoting independence, and her students appear to manage that freedom well.

Just before the tardy bell rings, Allison leaves her post at the entryway, sits on a rolling stool at a small table at the front of the room, and opens a slide on her Smart Board to prepare for a quick morning meeting and 1st block. A few students approach her with questions or share quick stories as she gets organized. Students interact with Allison in a relaxed, respectful way but with a certain level of reverence. It is obvious that they see her as the leader of the class, but an approachable one. Her expressive eyes, calm voice, and warm smile, combined with established routines to acknowledge her students and solicit their thoughts and feelings, show that she is genuinely interested in their lives, which significantly contributes to a sense of classroom community.

We meet for our first interview on a cold December afternoon. Minus my recording device, positioned prominently in the center of the table, and an official looking clipboard with my interview guide attached, all our semi-structured interviews look and feel very much like the weekly conversations Allison and I engage in as teacher and instructional coach. Our talk regularly includes observations and confessions about successes and challenges in the classroom. We reflect thoughtfully on those observations as we plan English Language Arts (ELA) lessons together every Monday and occasionally on Tuesdays. Allison is in the fourth year of her teaching career but is fairly new to Holly Hill. This is her second year as a fifth-grade teacher at Holly Hill and her first year participating in departmentalization, a new initiative for the fifth-grade team. As a coach, I support all teachers in whatever ways they request: planning, resources, co-teaching, assessments, professional development, etc. My role keeps me cognizant that teachers have an extremely full plate. Accessibility to a coach colleague is particularly important for Allison as she continues to learn the school culture and carry out district initiatives, including the newest expectation that she will deliver ELA/SS curriculum to the entire fifth grade at Holly Hill, a total of ninety students.

Of all the teachers at Holly Hill, Allison excels at creating a true open-door policy. She invites colleagues into her classroom regularly for feedback; this includes administrators, coaches, special education teachers, our gifted education specialist, librarian, and technology specialist. Most teachers, especially newer ones, are uncomfortable putting their teaching (and vulnerabilities) center stage. Allison's openness and willingness to solicit and learn from feedback makes collaboration with her easy. In addition to conversations about the delivery of academic content, Allison often alludes to her duty and priority to teach *people* -- malleable young learners from a

variety of backgrounds, with a variety of strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Her attention to the learners in front of her, often demonstrated through her dedication to differentiating instruction to increase student access to content, made me curious about her inspiration and commitment to connecting with students. Her openness about her efforts to experiment with strategies and practices to better engage *all* learners has led us to many reflective conversations and has given me insight into her professional goals. Even though our weekly meetings include occasional small talk about special people in our lives or things we like to do when we are away from school, I approach our first interview realizing I am quite unfamiliar with Allison's personal background and lived experiences. Curious about what leads a white teacher to embark on race-related topics and discussions with young children, something Allison is willing to do, we begin our first interview, which focuses on family background and racial identity. By digging into her childhood memories and her lived experiences, I hope to uncover how Allison has developed perceptions and understandings about race, especially her own whiteness, and how her understandings influence her teaching practices.

"That wasn't something we discussed."

As we launch into a conversation about her childhood, Allison tells me that everyone in her family is white, but she makes it clear that even though both sides of the family share the same race, her mom and dad grew up very differently. One difference was economic status. Allison's mother grew up on a farm in South Carolina, one of four children, and her family was poor. Her dad lived the largest portion of his life in the Midwest, one of three children, and he grew up middle class, the son of a railroad executive. Her paternal grandfather was an educated man, the first person on her father's side of the family to earn a college degree. Her father was well provided for and

lived, as she describes, “a very 50s-type, traditional lifestyle. Grandma’s main job was to make sure everyone was fed and that the house was tidy and inviting. Grandpa was the breadwinner.”

Whereas Allison’s mother’s existence was stationary and anchored to the family farm, Allison’s father moved around a lot because of his father’s work with the railroad. Allison remembers visiting her paternal grandparents in Roanoke, Virginia, where they retired. She also remembers them being very loving and kind, although she did not have an extremely close relationship with them. Allison’s maternal grandmother died before she was born, so she only knows about her from her mother’s stories and photographs. Her maternal grandfather died while she was in middle school, but she is quick to say that she never had anything to do with him. When I asked the reason behind her non-existent relationship with her maternal grandfather, she answers with a more restrained response.

> My mom’s dad was abusive and hateful, at least that is what I have been told. As a kid, what that meant was not exactly clear, but I comprehended it as him hitting my grandma. I think he also threatened the whole family with guns and violence. Unfortunately, back then, wives in rural South Carolina did not divorce their husbands, so my mom’s family lived through some really stressful times.

Later she reveals that her grandma did eventually leave her grandpa, but she is fuzzy on details about how she managed it. Allison did not spend time wondering or seeking stories about her maternal grandpa, but when she was in college, she saw a photograph of her mother’s farm, which she describes as jolting.

> That’s when I got a clearer picture of the degree of his hatred. The photos showed these massive pecan trees in the front yard. I remember seeing those trees and thinking how beautiful they were but couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw a noose hanging from one of the trees in a photograph... The farm was located in a hotbed town for KKK activity. My grandpa was part of the KKK.

Allison describes the shocking image of the noose and the disturbing realization the photo provided about who her grandpa really was -- a racist who exhibited chilling hatred. When I surmise that seeing such a photograph must have prompted conversations with her parents, Allison responded, “That wasn’t something we discussed. We never talked about race. If I had wanted to talk about it, [my parents] would have, but I don’t know, I just never felt the need to, I guess.” Based on Allison’s body language and tone, I get the feeling that she views her family’s silence about race as an evolution of sorts, an indicator of progress. Juxtaposed against her grandpa’s overt racism, her family had risen above racism and therefore did not need to talk about it. Silence about race appears to be a testament to their transformation. As I probe and encourage her to recall the first time she noticed race, she mentions middle school, around age twelve, when she became aware of it in a general way, as a physical trait, not really connecting it to status or power at that point in time. She states, “It’s not that I didn’t notice race; it was more of just an understanding… not a big deal to me.” She tells me that her best friend in middle school and high school was black; that her first boyfriend was black; that her prom date her junior year was black; “...and I didn’t think anything about it.” But she follows this proclamation with a memory of her mother on prom night. Allison’s mother routinely documented events and feelings in journals. One day Allison’s mother shared some of her written reflections from prom night as they were taking prom pictures:

> I’m trying to remember exactly what she said, something about what if SHE had done something like that. [Me: “Go to prom with a black person?”] Yes, and how would HER dad have reacted? You know … just being worried for me, and it wasn’t like I had contact with my grandparents. It was more of her just thinking about what she had experienced and then thinking, ‘my daughter’s not going to grow up in that hateful environment.’ But, I mean, that’s what **she** grew up with, so it was hard for her not to wonder, you know, what are other people going to

> think? ...Where she grew up, in South Carolina, nobody did that. You hung out with the same people that were the same race as you, and you didn't think outside of that.

At this point, Allison's speech fluctuates in speed as she talks; she clips some phrases and her sentences get a little jumbled, perhaps because she has shed light on difficult truths -- that despite her mother's best efforts to let go of her past, her daughter's choices and actions were considered outside the white norm and triggered "worry." Allison talks with pride about how she could hang out with friends of color openly, and she describes being taught not to notice race.

> ...It was like an ignorance is bliss kind of thing. I didn't recognize it (race). I wasn't aware of it, and I didn't think about it, because I had grown up with a mom that protected me from needing to think about it.

In the next breath she admits, however, that around the same age she did begin to realize that not everyone lived the same way and that some of the differences she noticed seemed to be connected to race - like houses and neighborhoods where her friends of color lived, which were not as nice as where she lived. The conversation veers into a few different directions before Allison regains focus on the topic and my questions. She has shared very personal information and revelations, and it appears to have thrown her off a bit. This is not surprising since the topic of race is slippery, sensitive, and often uncomfortable for white people (Dyson, 2017).

"You don't know what other people have experienced."

Allison regains footing when I ask her to elaborate on some other lessons or messages she received about race during childhood, intentional or unintentional ones. She perks up and begins to tell me about living in Japan. Though she was born in California, Allison's family moved to Japan when she was a baby. She lived there until

she was six years old and has vivid memories of pre-K and kindergarten at a bilingual school, where most of the teachers and students were Japanese. She remembers not being able to communicate with other children in class, because she did not speak Japanese. Her teachers paired her frequently with another English-speaking child, a little girl who would scream and cry most of the day due to attachment issues. Allison remembers despising her teachers' decision to pair her with the crying child over and over again. She wanted to get to know the other children. Even with the language barrier, she preferred their company. She connects this experience to how she works with students her classroom. "I never want students to feel limited by language…They may not be able to speak English fluently, but there are other ways to communicate and connect." She recalls additional difficulty connecting to classmates and her new environment upon moving back to America and later between two states. She is sensitive to students who move to Holly Hill from different parts of the world. Her passion for inclusivity becomes clearer to me as I listen to her recall memories about moving from Japan back to America and the adjustment issues she faced.

> You don't know what other people have experienced. My experience overseas was positive overall, yet I felt foreign sometimes. But I've had students tell me they came from Iraq or Afghanistan where have seen people get blown up. Knowing what a kid is experiencing every day, what's happening to them at school and at home [pause] sometimes I think we assume too much - that because a child may not speak English fluently he is limited and not adding value to the classroom… I don't ever want to send a message to children that I am writing them off based on their struggle to explain something orally or write thoughts down.

As she reflects on differences, she tends to center her analyses on culture rather than race. Conflation of race and culture emerges again when Allison critiques the way flyers about school events are being sent home to families -- translated in just one

language besides English. She expresses empathy for non-English speaking families and frustration regarding this practice. She sees it as unfair because so many other languages are spoken by families at Holly Hill. She explains that classroom teachers are expected to contact district-contracted translators for assistance with translations before sending home information related specifically to their grade level. Translators help the team send classroom information in multiple languages, yet the school administration does not consistently show diligence in this practice. She believes that sending information home only in English and Spanish conveys the message of "outsider" to other non-English speaking families.

Recognizing that there can be overlaps between ethnicity, culture, and race, I ask Allison to elaborate specifically on the black population at Holly Hill. I remind her about American black families reporting that they feel like outsiders sometimes too, and for them it is not a language issue. She responds, "I was just thinking about some of the groups I've had in the past, families who spoke Swahili; they are African Americans." The concern about black families feeling like outsiders at Holly Hill has been so great that the school social worker and the Equity Team have tried to put things in place to make black families feel more connected and cared about. Even though most of these black families speak English and receive school information in English, thus English barriers are not an issue, their attendance at school events is typically lower than white families. Allison eventually acknowledges that black students and families feel like outsiders too and expresses sadness about it. Whereas Allison can offer a solution to the language problem -- having school information translated in multiple languages -- she struggles to explain and is less confident generating solutions to the black outsider issue. Allison's empathy for students from various parts of the world cannot be denied.

However, when I ask her to speak about messages schools may intentionally or unintentionally send to families of color, most of her examples conflate race and culture. The contexts and examples she provides focus primarily on language and avoid the racialized reality that black, American, English-speaking families often feel like outsiders too.

"I was thinking I wasn't as privileged as I actually was."

During my first member check with Allison, after interview #1, she concedes that she has lived a very white life. Seeing her responses on paper solidified that reality. Her entire family is white. Even though she had occasional childhood friends of color, she has lived in white neighborhoods her whole life, except for five years of her childhood in Japan. She was educated primarily by white teachers during her K-12 years. She did develop friendships with non-white children in middle and high school but reading over the transcript helps her connect some dots that she had failed to connect before. Allison always thought that she could identify with many of her friends of color based on a shared experience.

> Growing up, a lot of my Hispanic and African American friends came from families that were not traditional, nuclear families… And so I thought, because my parents were divorced as well, that we could relate to each other in that way. For a time, my dad wasn't a part of my life. He lived in another state. So, I assumed his absence put me on equal footing with my friends, many of whom had never met their dad or were being raised mostly by their moms. At the time, I was thinking I wasn't as privileged as I actually was. But looking over the transcript made me realize that our lives were not the same just because of divorce. I realize that, even though my dad was not around for a while, I had some security and opportunities and exposure to certain things that my friends did not have access to... White privilege allowed my dad to be CEO of a company, for him to provide a middle-class life for me, and for us to have a unique and positive experience living overseas. White privilege allowed me to live in the house I lived in, in a great neighborhood. I had a really good childhood. I didn't understand as a high-schooler that our lives were not at all the same, and I certainly didn't realize that race had a lot to do with that.

Allison remained in contact with a few of her black and Hispanic friends from childhood even after transitioning to college. She describes these friendships as close, eye-opening, and longstanding because of the trust and honesty that developed over time. She credits her friends of color during middle and high school for exposing her to different perspectives, although she admits that she did not fully grasp the complexities of race and racism back then. She identifies her college years as a period when her awareness about race changed significantly due to exposure to her roommate and a larger group of friends of color. Being assigned a black roommate her freshman year at college increased the quantity and quality of time she spent interacting with black peers. She and her roommate, Christina (pseudonym), developed a genuine friendship, and issues around race became much more apparent to her during that time. She characterizes the college she chose for undergraduate studies as a "fairly diverse place," but a quick check on enrollment statistics shows that the college she attended has historically been very white, around 80-85%. Her perception of diversity was probably influenced by her freshmen friend group. Allison and Christina hit it off well. Allison met and enjoyed hanging out with many of Christina's friends too, most of whom were black. She became privy to new perspectives through daily interactions with her new black friends. She proceeds to share with me how surprised she was to hear about and witness the treatment of her black friends doing "regular" things, like hanging out at the mall. She recalled a time when a good friend, a black male, told her about the way a white woman reacted to him one day in town. She was shocked when she heard the story and responded, "I would never let her get by with saying stuff like that to you!" Allison explains that conversations with friends of color made her aware that, in these types of situations, her white privilege would allow her to question the behavior of the

white woman and defend her black friend publicly, but her black, male friend could not get by with the same behavior without risking serious consequences. She also began to realize that her white privilege allowed her to decide when to get involved and when to let things slide. “If I wanted to, I could just kind of sit back and not even think about it. I had the luxury of moving in and out of settings to make myself more comfortable. My black friends did not have that option.” The closest she has come to experiencing prejudice herself was receiving hateful looks when she and another mixed-race, male friend were walking together. “I think white people thought we were dating, and they would shoot us disapproving looks.” According to Allison, this friend group made her acutely aware of her white privilege. She began to recognize the luxury of being white in public spaces -- never having to think about or deal with snide comments or scornful looks based on the color of her skin.

“They don’t realize they are saying anything wrong.”

Unfortunately, most of her freshman friend group left college before graduating, for what Allison describes as a “variety of reasons.” Considering the lack of diversity on campus, I suspect that their decision to leave may have been race related. The departure of several members of her original college friend group was followed by the assemblage of a new group of friends. Upon entry to college, Allison had envisioned herself majoring in music therapy. Allison changed plans, however, when she learned that earning a music therapy degree required several vocal performances in front of large audiences. Further investigation of the major led her to contemplate a career in teaching, a choice that would lift the burden of musical performances yet fulfill her desire to help others. She declared elementary education as her major her junior year.

Commitment to elementary education put her in contact with a group of young white women also pursuing education degrees.

> I would invite them over and we would work on projects together, but I was still living with a few of my black friends. [Me: “So they crossed paths? Your white and black friends?”]. Yes, they ended up knowing each other pretty well.

Through the course of the interview, Allison characterizes her friends of color as people she trusts and with whom she has engaged in numerous honest, candid, difficult conversations. She also identifies the white teacher group as close friends and people that she loves, but then she hesitates.

> I know I can trust them too, and they are loyal, but it’s to a [pause]… it’s a certain extent to which I am able to tell them [pause]… there’s still certain things that I wouldn’t talk to them about… that I wouldn’t mention in front of their husbands. [Me: “Like what?”]. Well, I heard the husband of one of my friends say they have new black neighbors across the street. I heard them saying [longer pause] ...I don’t even want to say it, because it’s awful [pause]. I heard them call them [pause] porch monkeys. I wasn’t even sure what that was or meant, but I knew it was derogatory. I don’t want to listen to that kind of stuff, you know? I know some people have grown up that way. Sometimes they’ll say to me, ‘Oh, I’m not racist or anything,’ and I’m like, ugh, but you ARE if you have to say it like that. [Me: “Do you ever tell them?”] So [pause], I don’t [pause]… I don’t stop them from saying it. Or I didn’t used to. Now I do. Before, I would just let them say it, thinking it’ll just go away. But I realize it’s part of their attitude. It’s the way they’ve been raised. They don’t realize they are saying anything wrong.

Allison pauses and shows obvious discomfort when describing confrontation with her white friends. I ask a follow up question. [Me: “Has it worked? Does saying something to them minimize some of their comments?”] Allison replies: “I think they are actually kind of embarrassed. And it’s only one friend in particular. Her husband says a lot of things like that. Um, but again, I don’t think she even realizes it.”

Allison continues, her speech out of rhythm as she attempts to negotiate her friend's complicity (and possibly her own) in behavior that cannot be classified as anything other than racist.

> I didn't say this part to them, but I know that I can't change anyone's thoughts. But I can at least try to keep them from saying offensive things around me, because I don't want to hear that [pause]... I would be embarrassed if some of my other friends heard some of the things they say.

I am intrigued when I imagine Allison navigating these two disparate groups of friends. When I hear her continue down an unsteady path of justification for her white friends' behavior, which includes a nod to racial innocence -- their rural upbringing has made them unaware -- I am thinking to myself that she is going to be extremely uncomfortable when she reads the portrait I write of her, especially because her description of events in her personal life contrasts considerably with her expressed passion for inclusivity and her intentional efforts to help marginalized children see themselves in literature and history at school. I have seen her engage enthusiastically in work to revamp units of study to include multiple perspectives and disrupt traditional, Eurocentric curriculum. However, the stories she shared and the defense she builds to protect her white friends contrasts sharply to her classroom existence. I imagine that once these words are made concrete and delivered in hard copy format, they will be tough for Allison to absorb. The member check that followed this conversation confirms the difficulty she experienced.

Prior to a member check, Allison and I review and reflect on the interview transcript individually, in private, and during that time we identify what we believe to be the most salient pieces of the interview. When we come back together to share our big takeaways, we then invite more discussion around them. Allison shares immediately that she notices how much she rambled before getting to her point. Because her

understanding of racism is unfolding and emergent, she remains stuck on this one observation and makes no attempt to discern meaning from her rambling. I encourage her to mention anything else that stands out. When she does not offer any other observations, I ask her if she can further clarify how she knows that her white teacher friend "doesn't realize it" when her husband uses overtly racist language openly when referring to their black neighbors. She describes a conversation she had with the wife (her friend) regarding the husband's racist slurs. The wife downplays the event, classifying it as a misunderstanding of his intentions. "He didn't mean anything by it," the wife assures Allison, adding that they did not mean to offend her either, to which Allison responds, "I know you're not intentionally trying to offend me or anybody around you, but when you have to front what you're saying with, 'I'm not a racist or anything,' then what you are saying probably is." During this exchange, Allison attempts to confront whiteness as she challenges her friends' beliefs and points out racism in that private moment. Even though this interaction demonstrates a disruption of whiteness, Allison's retelling of it seems to uncover a certain amount of regret that she chose to expose this example. A tone of hopelessness emerges during her explanation.

> Even though I say something sometimes, I don't think it creates a filter for them every single time. They probably watch what they say around me a little more… Now around their family, I think that's different because that's the kind of environment they grew up in.

She begins to compare her white friends' rural upbringing with her mother's rural upbringing, as if discovering a legitimate justification. "Just like what my mom grew up with; she can't [pause] she can't help the way she grew up, but my mom is also [pause]. I mean, in my opinion, I don't think she is racist at all." I perceive this reference to her mom as an attempt to tidy up the story about her rural, white friends a little, but as she

begins the “rural mindset” defense, she quickly retreats from her analogy, as if realizing the catch-22. If she suggests that a rural upbringing causes isolation which contributes to ignorance about race and holds it firmly in place (a theory she puts forth earlier regarding her white friend group), then she comes close to suggesting that her mother, also a product of a rural upbringing, may continue to possess deeply entrenched racist thoughts and beliefs. Any suggestion of lingering racism would make her mother look bad, and Allison has already touted her mother as rising above her past and her klansman father’s overt racism. If she flips the conversation to protect her mother and highlight her mother’s triumph -- rising above the racism she experienced in her southern, rural town -- she threatens to expose her friends’ unwillingness to change their racist ways. If her mother can change, something she has expressed great pride about, then her white, rural friends can too (but they have not). Eventually realizing that her rural mindset defense obscures her point, Allison shifts to a safer, more universal statement, which almost feels like a gesture to me to move on to other topics. “Well, we are all judgmental and we all have our own biases and stereotypes, and I don’t think [it] matters what race you are… It’s in our nature to judge.”

I follow my curiosity and ask, since Allison indicated earlier that she still remains in contact with a few of her black friends, “So how do you maneuver between those two groups of friends? Does it feel strange? Do you ever feel like you’re betraying one group or the other?” Allison’s response, interspersed with pauses, shows a conscious desire to proceed cautiously. It feels like it is important for her, at this moment, to confirm her white friends’ goodness.

> So, I’ve never heard them say anything about them (her black friends). It’s more like strangers they may pass on the street...I like to think that they know better. I can’t control what people think, but they’ve always been really friendly with each

> other...because I think we've had chances to hang out at our apartments or watch movies together.

Later in the interview, she distances herself from her white teacher friend group, emphasizing that, beyond their views on race, her white teacher friends are very different from her. "So, everything about them is completely different. I don't have the same type of thinking." She describes them as conservative in their views. According to Allison, they marry young, and have children at young ages, and they choose to stay close to home. When I attempt to bring our conversation back to race, Allison responds with a hint of exasperation.

> ...Equity is not just an hour-long conversation; it's something you constantly do. So, I know when I make comments like that to them, it's probably going to go over their heads once I leave, right? I can't constantly keep up with them. I really love these girls… but we have a lot of different values. They are good people; they don't have the eye-opening experiences that we have here, like all of the equity conversations that we have. They don't have access to it [pause] they're just kind of ignorant about race; they don't know.

"I think they are good for the county where they teach."

My thoughts return to the white women friend group and their roles as teachers. Throughout our interviews and in casual conversations during planning, Allison has expressed her belief that schools play an important role in developing critical thinkers and responsible citizens. Allison does more than simply state these beliefs. She works extremely hard to create differentiated lessons and assignments to ensure that all her students have access to content and are challenged to think critically as they connect learning to their own lives and current events. I am often struck by her commitment to meet the needs of all her students. She never takes a shortcut when differentiating lessons. I have witnessed her making three different graphic organizers for research

tasks; finding various articles on a topic to accommodate all reading levels; sending out three or more versions of an assignment to students to ensure access to content and increase chances of success. Differentiation at this level is hard work, but Allison never complains about it or questions the need to do it consistently. I am often touched by how much she cares about her students. Additionally, she opens her classroom up for discussion around injustice and tough issues like immigration and racism, altering and enhancing curriculum occasionally to reflect multiple perspectives. Knowing the amount of work and thoughtfulness she puts into her teaching, I ask her opinion about her white college friends. [Me: "In your mind, what kind of teachers do you think your friends are?"] Allison thinks for a moment before answering.

> I think they are good for the county they teach in. If they came here, I don't think they would be very successful; they would fail. I think they teach like they were taught and in the way their districts support...They've told me stories about building relationships with students, and I believe they do, but at the same time, they mostly have kids who look just like them.

I am rattled a little when I hear Allison say this and cannot help but wonder what it means that she thinks that white teachers teaching primarily white students in rural areas do not need to deeply consider issues of race.

"…but at least I am talking about it."

Allison's approach to instruction shows a desire to address race. As a volunteer member of the school's Equity Team, she credits the team and several key staff members for bringing conversations about race to our faculty meetings and keeping them at the forefront as we contemplate what is best for children. When asked if she is more comfortable talking about race with Holly Hill colleagues or with her students, she quickly pinpoints specific colleagues. Because the staff has developed a positive climate

around race talk, and a portion of each faculty meeting is dedicated to it, Allison feels like it is safe conversation. She admits that sometimes she is more conscious of her word choices when engaging in equity activities with colleagues of color, but she feels comfortable, even when she missteps or experiences confusion. She describes her colleagues as supportive -- discussions are not treated as "gotcha moments" where one is shamed for their lack of knowledge or understanding.

> I grow so much from hearing different perspectives. I would rather sit at a table with colleagues of other races than sit at a table of white co-workers during equity conversations. My eyes are opened every time we meet, and I am appreciative of the opportunity to learn.

I ask her why she is less comfortable talking about race with her students.

> So, my being uncomfortable doesn't come from talking about race. It's more of me not really sure what I would do if a kid did say something I wasn't ready for. That's something we don't really talk enough about at staff meetings… The classroom is supposed to be a safe space. It's supposed to be a welcoming environment. And so, if I am opening it up for discussion, I feel like I have to be prepared for any kind of scenarios that may come up. I worry about how offended a student may be if the wrong thing is said.

During one of our interviews that focused more on pedagogy, Allison identifies literature as a powerful vehicle for starting discussions about race, and she explains her efforts to select high quality texts to shoulder some of the race talk work for her. One of the books she refers to is *Mr. Lincoln's Way* by Patricia Polacco, a story that addresses race directly. She skillfully uses this text to teach techniques of memoir during a writing unit while also opening the floor for a conversation about race. In the story, a white student, Eugene, uses racist language about the school's black principal, Mr. Lincoln. The story teaches readers that we often participate in racism as a result of repeating what we have heard without examining the meaning behind it. Allison has also used a

school-adopted common text, *Let's Talk About Race*, to generate explicit, whole-group conversations about race this year. This children's book encourages students to think critically about race and how it influences our perceptions of each other. To connect race to power, Allison has led her students in interrogating our nation's founding documents during an integrated ELA/social studies unit. Using primary sources, she asks students to analyze the language used to promote concepts of liberty and justice as America forged its identity and independence from Great Britain. A year ago, the fifth-grade team and I added counternarratives, often excluded from traditional units about the American Revolution, as a central focus of the unit on the American Revolution. During fifth-grade planning time, colleagues spent a large block of time finding resources and later taught about James Lafayette, an enslaved African American who acted as a spy for the patriot cause, and Mumbet, a female slave who sued her state in open court for her freedom, becoming the first African American woman to be set free in Massachusetts. Stories about slave spies and defenders of freedom are compelling on their own, but Allison and her teammates went further than simply naming the contributions and successes of black people in these stories. They also named the actors of injustice -- wealthy, white people -- leaders, lawmakers, landowners, slave owners, and regular white citizens. As students examined power and identified the voices that rang out loud and clear as our Founding Fathers mapped out a new nation, Allison encouraged students to also ask, "Whose voices are we not hearing in this story?"

This year, I noticed that the American Revolution unit was changed to make room for some other activities. Allison's open-ended *Teach Me Something* project, a newly added, student-centered piece, invited students to choose an element of the American Revolution to research and teach to the class. Students were given the

freedom to choose topics such as: causes of the American Revolution, famous battles, the role of women, the role of African American slaves, the Boston Tea Party, and spies, to name a few. Departmentalization may have played a role in creating some curricular shifts this year, or perhaps Allison wanted to experiment more with student engagement and choice. The *Teach Me Something* project encouraged students to take the lead in their own learning as well as teaching their topic to others. Sadly, Lafayette and Mumbet did not make the cut this year. In fairness, I was not present for many of student-produced presentations and teachings on their topics, but I was able to see many of the projects via Allison's twitter uploads and hallway displays at school. It appears that some of the deeper questioning around equity and abstract concepts such as freedom, liberty, and justice were less central to the discussion this year. A deep examination of points of view, exercises where teacher guidance and carefully selected activities and questioning pushes students to consider contradictions about freedom, then and now, were replaced by student research projects on more traditional themes. The new layout and pacing of the Revolutionary Way unit appeared to have focused primarily on battles fought and significant historical figures, white men such as General George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, as well as writers of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, and John Adams. In my literature review in chapter two, I cited the tendency of white teachers, even introspective, race conscious ones, to stick to traditional curriculum when constrained by time or challenged by unsteady confidence. My guess is that Allison, an enthusiastic supporter of giving students more choice in their learning and showing mastery of content, wanted to experiment with a new format. But I cannot ignore the observation that some of the content developed around equity and race, something I was intimately involved in, shifted more to the periphery, whereas it

was originally designed to be central to instruction. This specific social studies unit presented clear opportunities to interrogate racism and power, and I am left wondering why Allison went this direction with it.

Sometimes access to high quality, kid-friendly texts that offer multiple perspectives is a significant barrier to expanding units of study to address equity and race and include multiple perspectives. Resources are often difficult to find, something Allison and I have discovered while planning and teaching the immigration unit. To combat this problem and better connect history to the lives of her students, Allison has begun collaborating with several specialists in the building about ways to revamp the immigration unit to make it more personal and relatable, even empowering. As we talk about changes to curriculum, Allison refers to her Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA) reference card, something she has tucked in a plastic badge holder, hanging from her lanyard. She explains the card as one strategy she uses to be racially conscious in her teaching. As a part of their equity plan, the school district in which Holly Hill is located, Rockwell Heights, encourages all teachers in the district to use specific question stems from REIA during decision-making to ensure systematic examination of how different racial and ethnic groups will likely be affected by a proposed action or decision (RaceForward). REIA can be a vital tool for identifying new options to remedy long-standing inequities. Allison pulls her REIA card from her lanyard and reads aloud one of the questions she routinely asks: *What does the proposal/decision seek to accomplish? Will it reduce disparities and discrimination?* Rather than just studying waves of migration from long ago and asking children to research an immigrant group, she thinks the new ideas for the unit will help reduce disparities and discrimination in the present. If she opens opportunities for all students to explore migration as it relates to

their own families -- how stories, objects, and traditions migrate and influence family histories, it will make the unit more meaningful. The culminating project will be for each child to curate a digital museum showcasing family artifacts. As she talks through this change with me, she expresses hope. By creating a connection between the social studies curriculum and students' family histories, she feels sure the museum project will decenter traditional Eurocentric perspectives and reset the white default position, normalizing being white and "othering" non-white people. In addition to learning the differences between forced and voluntary migration, learning about each other's families will direct attention to commonalities and shared experiences and promote a sense of belonging, a positive and engaging way to explore and expand students' perspectives on immigration. I can feel her excitement, but she ends our discussion about the project with a shoulder shrug. The shrug indicates to me that she is doing race talk as best she can.

> As I am leading a lesson, if race comes up, it is likely that I will say something that may not be the best thing to say... but at least I am talking about it. Sometimes you have to wonder, as a white person -- is what you just said more damaging than not talking about it at all? I don't know, but I think it is important to try.

Analysis of Allison's Portrait

As I reviewed notes, recordings, and transcripts from all our interviews, I analyzed Allison's words, body language, and speech patterns and listened *for* a story. Her narrative reveals the co-existence of two identities: a race-conscious one, where race is visible and explicitly addressed, and a race-evasive one, where she hesitates, even resists at times, confronting racism, especially whiteness. There are many nuances and complexities within Allison's accounts, but her exhibition of both race-conscious and

race-evasive narratives, depending on context, shows a developing, conflicted mindfulness.

Allison's accounts reflect occasional bouts of incongruity and the use of evasive language that sometimes seems to inhibit critical examination of race. Her digressions and long pauses when I ask for clarification about the way she navigates her two friend groups, fall into what Bonilla-Silva (2018) identifies as "rhetorical incoherence," a function of talking about race in a world that insists that race does not matter. When she is confronted with uncomfortable questions about her white friends using or ignoring overt racist slurs, I sensed tension between what she knows and what she does. The level of incoherence in her speech increased noticeably as contradictions in her story surfaced. Allison has knowledge about race, racism, and power. She understands and recognizes inequality on a cognitive level and expresses a desire to see changes at school, in the lives of her students, and in the world. Allison participates in difficult conversations about race during professional development sessions and creates space for students to engage in critical analysis of race and social issues in her own classroom. For these efforts, she is to be commended, especially since there are so few models for racial discourse at the elementary level.

According to Picower (2012), however, "by only teaching about social issues, teachers raise awareness about the symptoms of injustice but never impact the roots..." (p. 71). Like many white teachers who engage in social justice education and experience levels of success with the endeavor, Allison may find herself "stuck at the classroom door" (p. 71), skilled at integrating social justice education into curriculum at times but unsteady at consistently applying and practicing what she teaches her students to life outside of school. Regarding her rural white friend group, to relieve the tension between

her knowledge and deeds, she relies on maneuvers that re-establish white innocence and justify inaction (DiAngelo, 2018; Mueller, 2017; Picower, 2012). White solidarity is one tool used by white people to stay safe. Defined as “an unspoken agreement among whites to not confront another white person when they say or do something racially problematic” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 57), adhering to white solidarity helps Allison avoid conflict. To avoid the risk of isolation, white people often choose silence in situations that reinforce racism. If Allison publicly confronts her friend’s husband about his use of the label “porch monkey,” she risks breaking white solidarity and suffering penalties, including possible loss of people she considers genuine and valuable friends. Her friends may label her a Debbie Downer or politically correct. By not interrupting racism, white people are rewarded with social capital; they are considered a friend and part of the team. As DiAngelo (2018) reminds us, however, “...silence is not benign because it protects and maintains the racial hierarchy and my [white people’s] place within it” (p. 58). Allison does take a risk when she eventually confronts her white friend privately about the derogatory comments her husband made, but she quickly witnesses another white maneuver to protect the husband’s goodness -- his wife’s claim of good intentions. He never intended to offend anyone, an excuse that Allison accepts based on his rural upbringing, which she suggests contributes to his white ignorance.

Mueller (2017) identifies another way white people dodge disrupting whiteness; they “mystify solutions” (p. 231) or generate doubt and mystery around practical solutions to racial injustice. Allison feels overwhelmed at times, expressed clearly when she points out how exhausting and impossible it would be to monitor her white friends’ words and actions. She asserts that her attempts to disrupt whiteness with explicit comments and lessons about equity do little to change their mindset. She insists that the

problem is so deeply entrenched in her rural white friends' psyches, she alone cannot alter patterns or make an impact. This seems to suggest that she views the problem as so large and beyond her control, it renders her helpless in solving it, and justifies inaction. It also allows her to maintain her friendships, even when her friends engage in behavior that she finds problematic. It is safest for her to direct her work to practical steps she takes at school to address disparities and racism, what she likely sees as a fair substitute for the impossible work of fighting injustice in the larger world. While she cannot change her white friends' thoughts and behaviors, she is doing something worthwhile in her job. Her professional work is evidence of her good faith efforts to confront injustice.

One huge challenge for activist educators who resolutely apply what they teach to their lives outside of school, is isolation at the school site. Catone (2016) documents the challenges activist teachers face when engaging in social justice education (SJE) in his book, *The Pedagogy of Teacher Activism*. Striving to be change agents, activist teachers often feel alone in the equity work they do at their schools, and they find themselves enacting liberatory change quietly due to the absence of collaborative, collective support. For Allison, the script is flipped. She is employed in a district that is not only conscious of inequalities in the education system, but they name them explicitly and train and nurture teachers to use culturally responsive, anti-racist practices. Allison is an advocate for change in her school building and is confident that curriculum is a powerful tool to build awareness about inequality. She often takes advantage of district support and the freedom she is given to design lessons to include multiple perspectives and engage students in critical thinking about race and power, especially when working alongside supportive team members. Allison appears less confident and less likely to

speak out against injustice when she is isolated from her collaborative support network of fellow educators. Instead, her socialization history kicks in. Most whites have been socialized to support and adhere to an “epistemology of white ignorance” (Mueller, 2017, p. 222), enabling comfort, complicity, and the reproduction of colorblind logics. Allison uses what Mueller (2017) describes as “tautological reasoning” (p. 230) to rescue her white friends as they engage in overt racism. Presuming white virtue, Allison uses a white racial frame and patterned logic to establish racial obliviousness and innocence, suggesting that if her white friends knew about systemic racism and white privilege, they would act differently; because they act the way they do, they must participate in racist behavior unknowingly, “a move that preserves white virtue while minimizing agency and motive” (Mueller, 2017, p. 230).

Socialization history is powerful. Allison’s prideful confession that her family did not talk about race because there was no need to, reveals factors that have influenced her construction of race, including her own white identity. She was taught, through unspoken messages, that silence about racial differences promotes racial harmony and verifies that one is not a racist. Despite lived experiences that placed her into friend groups with people of color and professional development within a supportive school environment that warns of the dangers of colorblindness, she continues to grapple with this deeply entrenched notion of whiteness. When given pushback about her white friends, Allison’s tone of voice, word choice, and phrasing indicates some defensiveness; she perceives my questioning as criticism of her friends’ moral character (and possibly her own). She responds by restoring their moral standing, invoking naivete while rejecting culpability. Her rhetorical moves here demonstrate the complexity of racial identity and meaning making within social contexts.

The way Allison navigates her racial knowledge is important to the work of equity. Even though we hear contradictory and competing discourses in this portrait, which reveal the co-existence of race-conscious and race-evasive identifications, we must acknowledge Allison's willingness to openly recognize her privilege and interrogate her whiteness as she bears in mind its impact on teaching and learning. Her mindfulness is indisputable -- she volunteers to serve on the school's Equity Team; advocates for more diverse books in classroom libraries, purchasing many with her own funds; frequently uses curriculum as a vehicle to expose students to multiple perspectives and counternarratives during instruction; and uses specific instructional strategies, like the REIA questions, to ensure that she makes decisions with her students' best interests in mind. This level of commitment and introspection points to an important degree of mindfulness that can be continually developed. A mindful teacher recognizes that race is contradictory, contextual, and regulated by social norms. Mindfulness is not, however, perfection – nor is it a state at which we arrive. We are always in process, practicing being mindful, even as we live contradictory and complicit lives. Even introspective, mindful teachers grapple with race and racism and sometimes struggle to recognize their whiteness within larger systems. It is not uncommon for their actions or behaviors to frequently remain rooted in their whiteness. I cite such phenomena in my literature review.

The durability of racial formation, influenced by family histories and social messaging, speaks loudly through Allison's stories and proves that simply confessing knowledge of racial bias and white privilege does not automatically lead to seamless antiracist thought and action across a variety of contexts. The fact that Allison, a mindful educator, struggles to work against her socialization demonstrates the grip of white

supremacy in our nation. Navigating race and fighting injustice is messy, difficult work. Allison, as a member of the dominant social group, recognizes the great potential and power she possesses to contribute significantly to social change, and she is making progress with her fifth graders. For continued, transformative growth, she will need to extend her anti-racism efforts beyond the classroom, a move that will expose Allison to the possibility of isolation from friends and getting hurt. I find it inspiring that she is engaging young children in race talk at times, and I feel hopeful about her continued growth and future contributions.

CHAPTER V

CLAIRE

Any teacher who has been in the field for at least a decade, perhaps less time, can verify the dramatic way testing has shifted the culture of schools, especially for our youngest learners. Slowly and steadily, policymakers have facilitated, if not dictated, the narrowing of curriculum, so much so that in many elementary schools, science and social studies have been sequestered to the list of endangered subjects. Architects of educational policy require teachers instead to double down on reading and math for most of the day, confident that increased practice and drill in these "core subjects" will result in essential learning (a.k.a. higher test scores). Claire Kimball obviously did not get the memo about narrowing curriculum to the point of collapse of subjects like science and social studies. Narrow is not the word that comes to mind when you step into Ms. Kimball's second grade classroom. Expansive opportunities occur there every day. Here are a few examples: 1) Discussions about natural disasters, civics, and economics, coupled with video production techniques taught by Claire so that students can apply them in a variety of formats throughout the school year, resulted in a student-led campaign to fundraise for the people of Puerto Rico who were devastated by Hurricane Maria; 2) The term, *birds-eye-view*, came to life for students when Claire utilized drones to capture images over a local park, images that assisted students in creating their own maps of the area; and 3) How can one truly understand metamorphosis and animal life cycles without the hands-on experience of observing, anticipating, and celebrating the hatching of chicks and butterflies in the classroom as well as discovering that

mealworms actually metamorphose into six-legged beetles? Reading, writing, and math, "core subjects," do not fall by the wayside in Claire's rich, interdisciplinary classroom where the focus is on learning through multiple means. Creative, exciting, active learning keeps Claire's second graders engaged and eager to come to school. If anything, while policymakers' and legislators' emphasis on the cornerstone subjects of reading and math is myopic, Claire deepens, enhances, and makes students' learning of these subjects more meaningful because of the integrated way she approaches them. Instruction in her classroom is much more about discovery -- real world, relevant, hands-on experiences across multiple subject areas -- and is much less about one's score on a test.

Real-world learning is omnipresent in Claire's classroom. For example, the fundraising efforts her second-graders engaged in to help Puerto Rican families who were devastated by Hurricane Maria (including the school secretary's family) motivated students to work and think creatively as Claire incorporated several curriculum standards from English Language Arts, social studies, and technology into the project. The activities and assignments connected the learning to real life events and experiences and required students to apply their knowledge and skills. Students wrote and recorded videos -- opinion pieces that explained why people should donate money. These videos were disseminated via an in-house blog shared with students' families and Holly Hill classmates and generated $300 in donations. Claire reported:

> Our students used their videos to help others, and I was able to assess their writing and speaking skills and their understanding of economic concepts…When my students know that their work has a purpose beyond getting a grade and an audience beyond me, they produce their best work.

As for the shift to more testing, Ms. Kimball does not deny the importance of testing when it is done and used appropriately - to help teachers improve instruction. Too often enthusiasm for testing settles into binary camps - one side sees testing and ranking performance as ensuring rigor, versus the opt-out/anti-testing side that views testing as stressful, reductive, and a waste of time and money. Claire subscribes to a balanced position. Testing has its place, but she questions, and has spoken out about, the overuse and misuse of testing - such as treating a single test score as the most legitimate measure of learning and using test scores to judge teacher performance. In an effort to inspire risk taking, creativity, and critical thinking to produce and support well rounded learners, Claire exposes her students to rigorous but developmentally appropriate, intriguing, and fun learning experiences throughout each day, and she appears to do so seamlessly as she also covers the required curriculum.

Underneath Claire's quiet demeanor is indisputable brilliance and dogged determination. Perceived by her colleagues as brainy, introverted, and reserved most of the time, she is vocal when she believes that decisions made on behalf of children threaten their well-being. She is strategic about when and how to advocate. Sometimes she shares thoughts and concerns at faculty meetings, whereas other times she will meet privately with building or district administrators. Occasionally she amplifies her concerns to a much wider audience. For example, Claire has published several professional articles in state and national educational publications and was invited to appear on a public television show broadcasted across the state, a forum focused on education. Years of devastating losses for educators and students in our state, at the direction of the state legislature, has resulted in limited teacher voice, leaving many educators feeling forced to "go along" with mandates, pedagogies, and policies that

disregard child development and child well-being. Overwhelmed by directives orchestrated by policymakers who disregard professional insight, educator morale is currently low; teachers feel beaten up and tired. “Skill and drill” teaching makes the educational landscape drudgery for young children and teachers. Claire feels frustrated as well but remains determined, willing to work and seek solutions that some may label as outside the box; however, she considers her methods an effective way to meet all children’s needs while also keeping wonder alive at school. A motivated learner herself and an experienced teacher with twenty years in the field, colleagues and parents find her to be a wellspring of knowledge. Claire reads, investigates, experiments, reflects, and collaborates to ensure that her perspective and teaching is rooted in sound research and evidence-based practices. She thoughtfully examines and sifts through information, contemplating and posing poignant philosophical questions like, “What really matters in our school -- competitive credentialing or helping everyone learn? And how do we make the things that matter count in the face of conflicting policies and ideologies?” If what the district or the school proclaims they value does not align with the infrastructure, policies, and pedagogical suggestions in place, Claire will call it out. She is a self-professed rule follower, but after working with her in several capacities; watching her in action with children and parents; witnessing her passionate and creative leadership; and conducting three in-depth interviews with her, I can sincerely attest to having witnessed an independent, maverick streak. It simmers just below the surface of her discerning stillness. She wields it judiciously but with gravity. Curious about how this outwardly mild-mannered teacher developed such fierce advocacy skills and a keen interest in social justice, I eagerly anticipate our first interview. Some of her outside-the-box,

nonconformist tendencies and approaches can be explained by the messages she received, from family and schooling, during her formative, early years.

"I don't remember talking about race growing up."

Claire's parents are both white, and all of her extended family is white too. She grew up in a white neighborhood in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C. "It was all white. I don't remember anybody not white being there." She lived in the same neighborhood her entire childhood and attended white schools. She struggled to remember any students or teachers of color at first, but eventually recalled one black teacher during her elementary years; she did not have her as a teacher, she just remembers her. She remembers just one black student in her school from her elementary through middle school years, K-8, and maybe one Asian student. Not much changed in high school either, except that students were grouped together based on who was enrolled in honors and advanced placement courses and who was not. The whiteness of her early years cannot be disputed -- it is crystal clear that she was socialized to see herself in a context of belonging. When immersed in whiteness, being white is typically not viewed as a significant reality warranting analysis. As we explored concepts about race, I asked her to speak about her parents and ideas they grew up with about race. She trips over the best way to describe them.

> My parents I think have -- they're definitely -- they don't have overtly [pause]. My parents don't, I think they have gotten [pause]. I don't remember talking about race growing up. I think they would have described themselves as liberal people. But they talk about race more now that they're older.

Claire's rambling, bumpy first attempt at a description of her parents' ideas about race appears to be an indication of proceeding with caution, wanting to make sure that

what she says, and *how* she says it, matches what she knows and has studied about race. I have observed this pattern of talk during conversations among white colleagues who are developing race consciousness and have obtained new knowledge regarding their own racial identity and the role whiteness plays in perpetuating racist systems (I am guilty of it, too, at times). Generally, white people do not talk about race, so it is not a skill that comes naturally. The cautious approach and stumbling over words reflects apprehension, discomfort, or worry that they/we will say something offensive or portray themselves/ourselves as insensitive or ignorant. Even people like Claire, who reflect, have knowledge, and feel they come down on the "right" side of race issues, struggle with race talk (DiAngelo, 2018; Sue, 2015). In fairness, I must also point out that it is our first interview, and I am firing questions at her, possibly unanticipated ones, with a visible recording device on the table, a setting that would make many people feel self-conscious.

Very quickly, however, Claire finds her stride and tells me more about her father and how he is evolving regarding racial consciousness. He grew up in North Carolina, and Claire remembers some subtle racism exhibited by her father's mother who worked in schools, first as a cafeteria manager and later as a teacher.

> ...I always remember her talking about *black* boys and *black* girls or *colored* boys and *colored* girls versus white kids, which, um, sticks with me because nobody else in my family would identify someone's race if they were not white, but she did.

Later, Claire stops and pauses while remembering her paternal grandparents, as if a random thought jumped into her head.

> Hmm...I wonder now, as I am saying this. Yeah, I wonder if my [pause]...I bet my dad's dad [pause]. I think he used the 'n-word' in front of us. I'm not one hundred

> percent sure, but I'm feeling that he did. That was a long time ago; he's been dead a while. I'm not sure; we didn't see them as much as my maternal grandparents, and I don't remember my parents ever saying anything about it. My parents never said, 'You will not say that,' or, you know.

Even though these racist undercurrents existed, Claire never remembers her family talking explicitly about race during her childhood.

Claire's father, who was exposed to some racist messaging as a child and grew up during a time when public spaces were segregated, is now 71 years old and has become very interested in race. Influenced by a friendship that developed through taking classes in a documentary studies program at a nearby university, Claire's father surprised the family when he began to discuss race and show excitement about assisting with a rap video. The story captured in the rap video is based on a slave escape and the juxtaposition of what was happening and accepted at that time and words within the nation's founding documents -- words like *justice* and *freedom*, and phrases like *all men are created equal*.

> He became friends with Logan (pseudonym), an African American man who… is working on his MFA in film. We're sitting around the dinner table one night, and dad is like, 'So, I'm working on a rap video' (she says, chuckling)… My dad did a lot of the filming… It's not done yet; I haven't seen it or anything… But I think it is cool. I get nervous that [my dad is] going to say something, you know, dumb. But I think that's probably my own issue. [Me: "And if he does say something 'dumb' around Logan, it sounds like Logan might directly point out what's wrong, or..."] Or know what dad meant.

In a society that is segregated socially along racial lines, racial isolation often impedes the formation of meaningful cross-racial relationships. It appears her father's friendship with Logan opened the door to a respectful, authentic, cross-racial relationship and consequently, some new thinking.

"...I didn't have a lot of experiences with people of color…"

We have established, after interview our first interview, that Claire's family was silent about race during her childhood, so I asked her if she picked up on any unspoken messages about race from her parents during her youth. Most of her examples center on her mother and her mother's work.

> So, my mom taught in a program called Even Start, which is like Head Start, but it had a parenting component. So, she taught all mothers who wanted to earn their GED. The mothers' kids would go to school in one room, she would be in the other room with them, and they'd have time where they worked together, plus they did parenting stuff… I'm sure there were some white women in the program, but most moms were black and Latina women, and she had really good relationships with them. And she had really great things to say about them, and I feel like all of that was positive. I was never, I didn't hear messages like, 'Oh, these people dropped out of school because they didn't make good choices.' My mom never once said anything disparaging about the people she was working with. She always had good things to say about what good moms they were or how hard they were working, or that kind of thing… Now that I am saying this to you, I'm-- I never really thought about it, but my mom was working with people of color and I never got negative messages from her about the people or what situations they were in.

I followed up by asking if she ever saw her dad interacting with people of color during her youth, and she said no.

> He worked in finance for an aerospace company for a while, which was, I'm sure, mostly white guys in suits. And then he owned his own company… so he had construction crews working for him, and the construction crews were largely good ol' boys. But I don't think he had a lot of interactions [with people of color].

As we end the first interview, I sense that Claire is feeling pleased about her revelation about her mother's interactions with women of different races and what it taught her. When we first began speaking, she apologized, believing that her family's silence about race gave me little to note or reflect upon; however, as we talked, I could see her realizing that she had, in fact, received some positive messages and positive role

modeling regarding race through unspoken actions, realized largely through her mother's work.

After each interview, as part of my member check, I transcribe the audio recording, present the transcript to the teacher, and ask her to identify her most salient observation. I do the same as I review the transcript, then we come together within the next two weeks to discuss our takeaways. Claire approached our reflection session about Interview #1 with a new perspective.

> So, I was thinking that obviously most of my interactions growing up… was with white people, and that my experiences with people of color… were largely things that I probably heard my mom talking about through her work. So, I started thinking about how important that portrayal maybe turned out to be. My mom...always had nothing but kind and positive things to say about all of the families she worked with, but I'm also wondering if another piece of that is how it [shaped my] perspective on race … experiencing or hearing about people of color who are always in need of help… And not having experiences with people of color who were leaders [pause]. [Me: "CEOs of companies, directors and owners of businesses, college educated…"]. Yes. That's something I think a lot about as a white woman… *not* being the white person who always helps out. [Me: "The white savior."] Right...I didn't have a lot of experiences with people of color and especially didn't have a lot of experiences with people of color who weren't getting helped by white people. That stuck out to me.

Claire identified the meaningful part of the interview to be about her mother's work and the beauty of the relationships her mother developed with people of color, but she also recognized that white saviorism seeped into and shaped her view of race.

"I had a lot of privilege..."

Claire radiates confidence. She appears scholarly and purposeful in most conversations with colleagues; the formality of her interactions indicate how seriously she takes her work. She admits that she spends her recreational time reading professional blogs, articles, and books. Extremely well read, she can quote from and reference numerous scholars and authors as well as benchmark research. Claire,

always an engaged and motivated learner, found that school and academics came naturally to her. She confessed that her racial awareness was developed through scholarly engagement rather than lived experiences. Interrogating ideas -- wrestling with theories and concepts -- it is like a sport to her. She also seeks and seizes opportunities to put her own ideas into the arena of scholarship; I have already mentioned her publications and professional presentations. It takes confidence, certainty, and backbone to put one's ideas out into the world, exposing them to criticism or challenge from peers and other professionals. Elements of Claire's upbringing might explain some of the confidence and daring she exhibits academically.

Her interest in ideas and asking questions was most likely modeled and reinforced by her parents who exhibited behaviors that, according to Claire, communicated that they valued knowledge and viewed themselves as capable, informed people, comfortable with scholars and critical thinking. After all, they were educated professionals, successful in their jobs, and affluent. Her mom dispensed information and advice to clients from a position of power; her dad worked in high level positions, eventually becoming an entrepreneur and starting his own company. Success in school, earning degrees, being in charge (of a company, a program, etc.), and living in an affluent neighborhood, a more common pattern in white culture than among communities of color, becomes problematic when white people, based on multiple successes and a sense of entitlement, inadvertently adopt the point of view that they earned and deserve their successes, ignoring the role of white privilege. If unchecked, this meritocratic point of view can magnify the way a person perceives his or her worth and authority. Beyond *possessing* knowledge, a white individual may convince themselves that their superiority also qualifies them to *interpret* settings and situations and make the "right" decisions.

I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that every white person with deep knowledge and extensive experience advises and leads through blind arrogance or is ill equipped to exert authority. I also wish to point out that I have no first-hand knowledge of Claire's parents or their interactions in the world. If my analysis feels a bit too critical, I want to put forward that the constructive criticism I advance regarding overconfidence, I can also apply to myself. My scholarly focus on whiteness - the reading and analysis I have done through formal schooling - tempts me at times to congratulate myself on how I now "get" racism in a way I did not before. I must remind myself that race played a role in my knowledge acquisition; that I grew up internalizing the message of white superiority; and that I need to be wary of becoming overconfident. Every time I attend another conference, read another book, talk with a colleague of color, I am humbled and realize how much more I have to learn.

Claire's context leads me to explore her parents' comfort and assurance in "knowing." DiAngelo's work on whiteness (2011) emphasizes that most white people, within their white dominant context, are bombarded with messages that they are important; better than people of color. Through socialization, many white people develop racial ignorance and arrogance. Without careful checks and reflection, difficult to achieve while immersed in an all-white world, they leave whiteness unexamined and often exert authority with unfounded confidence. Claire is, without a doubt, well read, studious, reflective, creative, and an experienced teacher. Her knowledge of curriculum and innovative teaching methods is not up for debate. She speaks out on a wide range of topics that impact education, in addition to race and whiteness. Her context and lived reality, however, is intriguing and worth consideration. She admitted having limited lived experiences with people of different races. Her white neighborhood, white schooling,

tracked classes, affluence, and her parents' opportunity hoarding (Lewis-McCoy, 2014, p. 10) possibly nurtured a sense of implicit or unconscious white authority along the way. Fortunately, Claire is a reflective learner and open to self-critique. She understands her privilege in a way her parents seemingly did not understand theirs. She sees the dangers associated with individualism, meritocracy, racism, and whiteness and she actively challenges these aspects of power by reading articles, books, blogs, and tweets by people of color, decentering whiteness, and being mindful before she shares her voice. These processes require effort. She will be the first to admit that she missteps sometimes, but she tries to use the mistakes she makes to deepen understanding and improve race relations moving forward, as both a race conscious teacher and parent.

Claire alluded to her mother's confidence when she described her fierce advocacy for Claire's educational needs. Early in her description, it was easy to visualize a supportive, loving, protective parent. Claire says that her mother was adamant that she knew what was best for her daughter, what her daughter needed and deserved from school, and had no problem demanding it from teachers and administrators. Claire refers to her mother as, "an eager advocate," engaged in "...questioning decisions that teachers made or asking for things to be done for me that weren't being done for someone else." She scrunches her face a little when she tells me that if a parent approached her now in the way her mother approached teachers back then, "...I'd be like, 'Oh my gosh, who does this parent think they are?'" She continues to tell me about her mom and more about her own childhood:

> I had a lot of privilege, and I think my mom [pause] in school, in particular … there were times where [her advocacy] probably was an exercise of privilege and race, but nobody in my family saw it that way. [Me: "Did you recognize it as a kid?"] I didn't recognize it as a kid. I recognize it as an adult, and you know, I think I have done that too. I can think of specific examples where I was totally

> exercising privilege and using it to my advantage in the school system… You couldn't measure how much of an impact [being white] had on the kinds of opportunities I had in life.

As an example of the fruits of her mom's advocacy, alongside the context in which she was raised, she recalls being part of an elite program in high school.

> In retrospect, a time that I think of in terms of the privilege I had, both in terms of coming from an affluent family and being white, was in high school. My friend, Becca (pseudonym) and I were in, um… we would drive to school together… this was our senior year, and we had one period together - we were in the gifted and talented program. And I can't remember what they called those [pause]. Seminars, I think? We would sit around the table and talk about stuff. It was great fun but every kid should have been able to do it. Anyway...there were about seven of us, and we would go sit with our teacher, and we would talk about paintings, and, I don't know what else. If we were ever late for another class, we would just go to her, and she would write us a note saying we had been with her, so that we wouldn't get a tardy. When I think about it now, oh my gosh, the layers of privilege in terms of the gifted and talented program, the gifted teacher, driving to school, having a car, all of that. I didn't think anything about it in the moment. But how many times a day were things like that happening for every kid in the school who had access to the resources we had access to?

Her exposure to gifted and talented courses, teacher support, and her parents' advocacy, most likely bolstered a sense of confidence and unconscious entitlement and shaped her view of self.

"I started thinking more about race..."

College was a natural progression for Claire. She described some of the "edgy" topics she dove into during higher education. She read and wrote about power, race, gender, and sexuality. She remembered having some interest in race and power during high school, but her interests deepened during college when she was introduced to black feminist theory. She describes her graduate school experience as an awakening of sorts.

> I did Women's Studies, and it was all about race, gender, and class… I started thinking more about race in college when I read *Black Feminist Thought*, by Patricia Hill Collins, which is all about intersectionality. And that, to me, it was like a moment of, 'Oh.' ...That's why I went to the graduate program I went to -- because Patricia Hill Collins taught there. And I got to take classes with her. But that was really interesting because she… she never said this to me, but the sense that I got was that there were a lot of white women thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to THAT university, and I'm going to study with Patricia Hill Collins.' And Patricia Hill Collins was like, 'No, you're not.' … She would not be the adviser for my project. I got to take classes with her, and in the program we also had international students, so it would be a diverse group of women in the room talking about race and gender and sexuality, and that kind of stuff.

Claire's graduate program and being surrounded by a diverse, inspiring, bright group of women aroused critical self-reflection for Claire. I asked if her parents ever expressed shock or disapproval when they learned about her undergraduate and graduate thesis topics, expecting her to say that they were stunned as they envisioned their young, gifted, rule-following daughter flirting with typically taboo topics. But that was not the case.

> My parents value an independent thinker, somebody who thinks outside the box, [and exhibits] creativity. If I was doing that, then that was exciting for them, and they were happy about that. So, if I was talking about race or talking about sex, they thought it was cool… My dad definitely -- that's what he values: creativity, innovation, uniqueness. So, as a white person, if you're talking about race, or as a young woman, if you're talking about sexuality...that's [pause]. [Me: "Pushing the envelope in a good way?"] Yes.

She references a book she recently read called, *Inequality in the Promised Land: Race, Resources, and Suburban Schooling* (2014). The author, Lewis-McCoy, analyzes how groups are defined, how resources are hoarded, and how white voices animate policy. Claire tells me that when she read the theories presented in the book about parenting styles and engagement, she immediately recognized, *concerted cultivation* (p. 5) as her parents' style.

Parents who practice concerted cultivation tend to be white and middle class. They keep their children involved in structured extracurricular activities - music lessons, camps, tutoring, and sports teams, as opposed to unstructured play after school, which is less rule-bound. Structured activities give children early exposure to authority figures, practice in developing rapport with adults, and they implicitly teach young children about formal institutions and processes. Such exposure helps white children develop positive relationships with authority figures and procure cultural capital that proves advantageous in many other formal spaces, school being one of them (Lewis-McCoy, 2014, p. 5). Lewis-McCoy argues that race plays a significant role in approaches to child rearing, which also shapes social and academic experiences. Claire admits that her parents, when advocating for her, engaged in *opportunity hoarding* (Lewis-McCoy, 2014, p. 10). White, privileged parents often believe that they are just doing what any good parent would do when they question teacher decisions or make special requests on behalf of their child. In reality, however, the combination of overt and subtle pressure, often results in the hoarding of opportunities for their own kids, at the expense of families who probably needed the resources the most (p. 10).

"There's a lot of racially and economically coded stuff happening..."

Claire, a mindful teacher, recognizes the powerful, unintentional messages she received about race as a child, insight that she has developed over the years thanks to her participation in a Women's Studies program; continued self-study focused on equity, race, power, and culturally responsive practices; and participation in consistent district and school sponsored trainings. Sadly, she can cite many examples of unintentional yet problematic messaging about race within schools today. Through policies and practices,

schools communicate that some families and students are more valuable than others and have more power.

For example, teachers, social workers, and counselors within the building help monitor and collect information and data on student attendance. Absences and tardies are classified as either excused or unexcused, and penalties accompany too many unexcused ones. The typical excused absence falls into one of these categories: illness, death in the family, religious observation, or educational opportunity. Claire witnesses white families exploiting the *educational opportunity* absence with little questioning or interference from school staff, whereas families of color experience greater scrutiny and are held more accountable.

> There's a lot of racially and economically coded stuff happening that shows we value -- actually, I don't even think it's that we value -- I think it's that white parents do not want to follow a policy. They don't like it and don't want to do it. They don't want their decisions questioned, and they don't think anything they decide to do with their child should be viewed as wrong.

Claire is referring to times when white families keep their children out of school when they are not sick, usually because the family is taking a vacation or relatives are visiting town. The educational opportunity option allows white families to manipulate the attendance system. To avoid their child accumulating numerous unexcused absences during a ten-day trip to Disneyworld, for example, they willingly fill out the appropriate form, on which they must provide a description of the activity and how it is "educational," and the system will allow them, via administrator approval, to remove their child from school without repercussions. If a parent knows the protocol and feels comfortable justifying the absence in writing, then the child's absence will be coded as excused, and classroom assignment deadlines will be adjusted. Claire explains further, "Whereas if

somebody else takes their kid out and they're not sick, a system has been developed to track it and send [the family] letters and phone calls and penalize them." Privilege impacts the consequences.

When Claire described another example of an imbalance of power and the unintentional messaging about race that derived from it, I was a bit stumped at first. Her second example involved the district's equity plan, a document riddled with words like: integrity, fairness, respect, and compassion. The Rockwell Heights School District has been engaged in equity work for at least twelve years. This work includes district-wide, collaborative projects with nationally acclaimed experts and trainers in equity. In 2015, district administrators put together an Equity Task Force to develop a fresh focus on equity and established a permanent Equity Director position so that this person could help lead the Task Force in the creation of a long-range equity plan. The consistency and depth of equity-focused work across that span of time has been dependent on individual schools. Holly Hill Elementary experienced some inconsistency. Attendance at on-site Equity Team meetings fizzled in and out for a few years, and at times the charge and direction of the group was unclear, but some dedicated staff members have helped rejuvenate interest and have reestablished a sense of mission. The administrators' decision to add an equity component to every faculty meeting, led by Holly Hill Equity Team members, also helps teachers at the school hear the same messages and work collaboratively on race-related issues that impact students, staff, and families. Claire praises several aspects of the Rockwell Heights Equity Plan. It helps increase the amount of race talk teachers engage in across the district, and she believes it is particularly effective at putting everyone's focus on big ideas like graduation rates, proficiency in subject areas, access to higher level courses, placement in special

education, and discipline data. She also feels confident that many people in the district are committed to it.

Claire's example of unintentional messages about race, however, deals less with big ideas and more with "small stuff." Claire says, "I think where the rubber hits the road is with these more complicated situations, the day-to-day kinds of things." She feels as though the district played a role in sending an unintentional, but powerful message about race and privilege when a parent questioned her handling of a disciplinary issue. Claire was intentional in using her equity training; she considered the impact of race when she thought through options for handling the classroom matter. She made a decision that she believed followed protocol and protected a marginalized student. She felt good about her decision and received the support of the building administration. Several days later, she learned that a parent of one of the students involved in the conflict complained to school officials at the district level. The parent who issued the complaint was the parent of the child who was reprimanded at school for his behavior. Claire had asked that child to apologize to his classmate, a decision with which the parent disagreed and took to a higher level. A district leader called Holly Hill's principal who then delivered the message to Claire that she needed to reconsider her decision.

> Nobody [from the district office] consulted with me or asked the backgrounds of the students involved. And I was informed that I had to reverse my decision, and I felt it was to the detriment of the most marginalized student in my class, not only because of race, but because of other factors as well.

Claire called the district office to speak to someone and left a message expressing her concern that the equity plan was not taken into consideration.

> So my feeling is, if race and equity matter, then they need to be training the parents too, because that's the people who they're letting run the show. The

> parent who was complaining didn't have the full picture, because they couldn't -- because there was confidential information I wasn't sharing with them… And what do we do about that? If we talk about equity, but at the end of the day, parents who are in privileged positions demand certain things without having an equity lens...if we are okay about that or decide it's a small matter and not worth the fight -- in the scheme of things, in my classroom, it probably registered as a very insignificant event, but ultimately I had one student who was taught that [he] can threaten violence against someone and then force [her] to apologize...And then my other student, who is housing insecure and homeless, and a girl, was taught through this interaction, that when someone threatens violence against you, YOU need to apologize to THEM.

In a follow-up member check with Claire, I asked if anyone from the Rockwell Heights district office returned her phone call and if the matter wrapped up satisfactorily. Claire reported that someone did call her back, said that they would continue to look into the matter, and that it felt good to at least be able to make her point, but she cannot bring herself to feel satisfied. She described the follow up phone call from the district office:

> The last thing I said was, 'We told a black, homeless girl that someone can threaten violence against you, and you can be made to apologize to them.' So, getting to say my piece was a step in the right direction, but ultimately, I had to do what the principal told me to do, and I feel terrible about it… It doesn't feel good because I chose protecting my career -- and for a white person, that's often the big question, right? -- What are you willing to give up? And in that instance, I didn't [pause] -- There's a piece of me that wishes I would've said right then, 'This is not acceptable,' and stood my ground. It was never a simple decision to go this route. I was never just selfishly looking after my career. I said my piece, but I wish I could've found a way to stand up for my student too.

The weight of this decision can be seen on Claire's face as we talk. An additional complication is worth mentioning. There was a fleeting moment when Claire considered challenging the district decision, but as she did so, she contemplated another conundrum. Such a decision would also involve pushing back against the black administrators in her school building. The principal and assistant principal at Holly Hill had originally supported her decision but were now instructing her to handle it differently,

following the district directive. She questioned if ignoring the directive would be an act of resistance and disrespect towards the black administrators in the building. She did not want to be the defiant white teacher undermining black leadership. There were no easy answers in this situation, and I foresee Claire dwelling on her final decision for a long time.

"And it is important for them to feel uncomfortable…"

Events like the one just described are difficult for Claire to shake and sometimes cloud her ability to recognize the impact of all of the other intentional, meaningful moves she makes to combat whiteness, "othering," and negative messages about race. My next set of questions shifted our talk into that direction. Claire uses very specific moves, subtle and overt, to disrupt whiteness and mitigate the negative consequences of institutionalized racism on students of color. The ways that Claire addresses race directly in her classroom are numerous, comprehensive, and powerful, but a few of her examples stand out.

Claire explains that she is very aware of race anytime small group remediation happens. Too often her reteaching groups are made up of students of color. During math instruction, she worries that her regular remediation group, consisting of three black students, sends a message to the class that only black students need extra help in math.

> So, I really try to -- I mean, there are times when I do homogeneous grouping, but I really try to do random and self-directed grouping in math a lot. So, like today, when we were partnering up for a problem set -- and this is later in the unit, so everybody has had exposure to and lots of options about how to approach problem solving; everybody has strategies they can use -- I had my students choose their own partners, and we talked about choosing partners who are good for us. I always call on my three black students first -- not right in a row, but towards the start so that they have lots of choices and can pick someone they feel comfortable with. It works really well. And I think it sends a message to the whole class about trust and that we all have something to learn from each

> other and we can all work together. That's a conversation and message about race that's positive.

Claire also mentions being very conscientious about the use of passive language. As white people discuss race and racism, they often conveniently omit information about the active participation of white people. Claire describes this tendency explicitly during instruction, pointing out specific examples to her young students.

> This was a few months ago. We watched a video about Rosa Parks, and I can't remember what the sentence was, but it was like, [pause] -- I think it was probably something like, 'Black people had to sit in the back of the bus,' or something like that. And it totally erased the fact that they were told to do so by white people. I want the kids to understand that this wasn't something that just happened; white people in power made these choices because it benefited them. And it hurt another group of people.

As they continued this unit on historical figures, whenever they discussed Rosa Parks, other people of color, or race-related topics, Claire made a conscious decision.

> I made sure that my students of color spoke first. So they led most of the conversation. They weren't leading in response to what white kids said. And I called on them disproportionately, so that in the conversation, we heard more from students of color than we heard from white students, and we heard from them first.

I was also impressed with the ways that Claire embeds equity into all subject areas and intentionally chooses, throughout the entire school year and not just during Black History Month, a variety of examples of contributions, historical and contemporary, made by people of color. Claire told me about her students enjoying a video she shared recently that featured Lin-Manuel Miranda doing freestyle rap on the lawn with former President Obama.

> The value of that is that it is current and fun. Plus, it's not someone who's -- we're not holding them up because they have faced injustices. In this case, it's somebody who is really awesome at what they do. And that's worthy. You don't have to be a person of color who has fought injustice to be worthy of mention in the classroom...I think when we talk about black history, it can make students, white students -- I don't think black students would feel this way -- but I think white students can think, 'Oh, that's over; it's done.' … I also try really hard to find examples of current events that show that inequality still exists today, and if we want to fight inequality, talking about race is one way to do it.

During our second interview, Claire tells a story about a class discussion that developed during Black History Month. A male student, who presents as white, responded defensively as Claire was teaching the class about the Sphinx Organization, a non-profit organization committed to diversity in the arts. Claire had just revealed the racial makeup of orchestras, noting the dominance of white people, reasons for the disparities, and the need to talk openly about inequities in the arts. This young student, who is also from an affluent family, spoke out. He expressed concern about open and continued talk about race and orchestras; it was disturbing to him to think about white people losing their spots in orchestras. In a seven-year-old kind of way, he expressed feeling uneasy about a rise in the number of all black orchestras or orchestras made up of only people of color, suggesting unfairness. The outspoken student's comments occurred just as Claire's class was wrapping up their discussion and needed to transition to music class. She thought about how to proceed, given the time constraint and the emotion being exhibited, and described her quick and rather direct response:

> I said … right now we have orchestras that are mostly white. [By diversifying orchestras] nobody's saying white people shouldn't be or won't be in orchestras. But we have to do more work to make sure it's fair for *everybody*. And that might mean creating some orchestras that are all, you know, people of color.

Claire tries to see students and their beliefs with empathy, appreciating their age and level of insight, validating them as complex and intriguing people, and she looks for strengths on which to respectfully expand discussions. In that instance, however, Claire believed she had to be direct and take a stand; something she sees as necessary at times, but she also mentions a common criticism of taking a stand like that.

> … there are some people who think that's just politics at play, but I believe it's not [political] -- I am comfortable with the belief that we have to do things like create and recruit for orchestras of color. I think it is really hard for little kids to understand, but...if we don't start talking to them about it now, then they're really going to have a hard time understanding as they age.

She also believes that white educators do white children a disservice when they avoid confrontation over tough topics to protect them from discomfort. White adults retreat from race talk when it creates discomfort, so it is natural that the same pattern occurs when white teachers witness white children looking and feeling uncomfortable. As for the boy who expressed concern about white musicians losing spots in orchestras, Claire believes discomfort was a necessary part of the discussion.

> ...when we have conversations as a staff about equity, we talk about discomfort. This idea of protecting children from discomfort -- if a white child feels uncomfortable in a conversation about race, it's probably because they are thinking about whiteness and their own privilege. And it is important for them to feel uncomfortable, because if we try to just make them comfortable, well then that teaches them that when something feels uneasy or not right, it's okay. It's not you. [Me: "And then we avoid it. We feel bad, so we just get quiet."] Right, and we perpetuate silence about race.

After sharing this point of view, Claire quickly interjects a reality that accompanies race talk with young children.

> The hardest thing for me is that I do have anxiety about when children say something that is racist or offensive -- often because they are speaking as seven-

> year-olds and not an adult over forty who has developed thoughts about these things, right? I always want to make sure that: 1) I am respectful and savvy about how I handle those things, but 2) also that I never have a conversation where a child of color walks out of it feeling like they were disrespected or that they are hurt more than they are benefited… that's the anxiety that inhibits me the most, and I'm trying to get over it.

Claire indicates, through this statement, that she is trying to do the best job she can as a mindful educator. She aims to expand and deepen conversations about race and wants to be responsive and challenging, when it is appropriate, but acknowledges that it is difficult, messy work.

The research is saturated with examples of how discomfort impedes race talk (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; DiAngelo, 2014; Sue, 2015), and I commend Claire for confronting and remaining engaged with her discomfort. At one point, she connects her understandings about discomfort and the opportunity hoarding we talked about in an earlier interview, when she recalls a speaker who visited the area. Nikole Hannah-Jones is an acclaimed educational researcher and journalist, and Claire was struck by her "uncomfortable" message about white people who claim to be anti-racist. It was a valuable reminder about where these claims break down. Claire explains how Hannah-Jones' talk resonated with her.

> Everybody says, oh, I believe in anti-racist education, I believe in integration, but then when it comes to their child, they say, 'But I'm an advocate for my child first.' As long as people do that, then it's just never going to change...As an educator, I do not buy this argument that we're not asking anybody to give something up… I am firmly in the camp that we ARE asking people to give things up, and it might mean that your kid or my kid doesn't get as many opportunities or doesn't get to do all the things that they've done in the past, because some other kid deserves that opportunity or those resources.

As Hannah-Jones emphatically states in her reporting and speeches shared around the world, "In a country built on racial caste, equality means those who have had unearned

advantages have to give some of that up" (Helms, 2018). Besides tangible benefits, opportunities and resources, Claire believes, as a classroom teacher, she has to be willing to give up power as well. She points to several examples where her power as a teacher, which was wrapped up in white privilege and racism, influenced her decision-making. Below I share one story she shared about catching herself perpetuating racist practices.

"I was taking the easiest route for me…"

Her story involves a black student in her classroom, a boy who had been getting breakfast at school for most of the year but then stopped. Around the same time, she began to notice some atypical behavior, some oddball days when he was shouting out a lot during whole group instruction and was showing some grumpiness. "I had a colleague who had written an article about the importance of breakfast and how sometimes when kids' behavior is unusual, it's just because they haven't eaten breakfast." With this fresh in her mind, Claire wondered if not eating breakfast had something to do with these changes. She knew that the boy's mother had to leave early for work sometimes; he had older brothers at home, but Claire was not sure that they were making him eat breakfast. "So, I just told him, 'I want you to start getting breakfast again, every day.'" When he told her that he did not like the school breakfasts, Claire ended up exerting her power.

> I said, 'If you don't like it, that's fine. You don't have to eat it.' But I was kind of thinking the same thing I think with my own children, which was if I put it in front of you, then you might actually drink the milk or have the cheese -- whatever… This went on for a couple of weeks, and he wasn't fighting me on it. He was getting his breakfast every morning. But, then I got upset with him about something one day, and he lashed back at me with, 'Well, you make me get breakfast every morning! And that's not fair!' This was totally out of left field and unrelated to our conversation at hand. So, I thought about it and realized that he was upset with me for making him get breakfast. And really, I am making some

> assumptions here based on class and race that are not necessarily founded. A simple call to his mother would have been the most appropriate line of action, but it's not one that I took. And I think this child, in his own way, was also aware that it wasn't [appropriate]. I was taking the easiest route for me, but it wasn't the most thoughtful or respectful route. And I think he was aware of it. So, when he said that to me, it made me aware, and I haven't made him get breakfast since. When I have my upcoming conference with his mom, I'm going to talk to her about it… It made me think about how sometimes [pause]. There are some parents where I wouldn't have ever done this; I would've asked them first. And in this case, I didn't, and I think race and class are tied up in that. I assumed that they weren't even being charged for the breakfast, but I don't know that. So, again, I was totally disrespectful of them and their finances -- the cafeteria could have been charging those breakfasts to the family.

Claire identified and owned her misstep and felt shame about communicating an unintentional but powerful message that reflected privilege, racial arrogance, and disrespect. This level of reflection, honesty, and humility deepens my admiration of Claire. Her willingness to sit in the discomfort of her authoritative decision that robbed a child of agency, is testament to her mindfulness as was her decision to apologize and engage in a conversation with the mother, face-to-face.

"I just know that [race talk] is really, really nuanced and fraught."

As we end our series of interviews, Claire summarizes her feelings about developing racial consciousness and wanting to be an ally - how building awareness and communicating positive messages is a process, and that white people are always becoming; they will never fully arrive at awareness. She explains the tricky balance she faces when she is trying to lead conversations about race in a way that is empowering and not detrimental - "It is a tall order." She recalls one time, outside of school, when she felt particularly conflicted.

> I was taking my children to the library for a summer book fair, and they showed a Scholastic video to get kids hyped up about it. It featured Usher [a popular black singer and dancer], and he was talking about -- essentially his message was, 'Books can help you be anything you want.' And I felt conflicted. On the one

> hand, I like the beauty of saying that to a child, because we want to build resilient, strong children who believe that. But on the other hand, that focus on the individual and not educating [children] about how systems of power and inequality work really just reinforces those systems of power. Right? In reality, a kid can be like, 'No, I read and I am still homeless. I read, and I still have to eat free breakfast while my friends play in the classroom in the morning. I'm reading, but I am still failing my math tests. And I don't have the answer to that. How do you do it in a way that seven-year-olds [pause] -- because seven-year-olds don't yet have the capacity to fully understand larger systems of inequality. I am trying to untangle it and do it right… my perspective is skewed by being a white woman. Maybe believing they are not ready for it reflects some of my own resistance or lack of understanding; I haven't experienced the need to talk about those things with my own children, whereas other people might be ready for it... I just know that [race talk] is really, really nuanced and fraught. In terms of conversations about race, the [Scholastic] video was a conversation totally ignoring race even though it was a black man who was a role model for kids! So, it was a racialized conversation intended [pause]. They wanted it to resonate with black kids, but he wasn't talking about race. And he was a black man acting like race didn't matter.

The tension often feels overwhelming and confusing to Claire who wants to be sincere, not performative, in her efforts to be an ally, disrupt whiteness, and talk openly about race. She describes herself as being in a state of paralysis sometimes - overthinking *everything*.

> This is an example… that illustrates the kind of tension I feel. On Twitter, there's two schools of thought. On the one hand, I've seen where people say - when a white person retweeted something that a black person, a black educator, tweeted, 'You don't have to interpret it and comment on it. Just use your account to amplify their voice. Just retweet it, and let it be their voice, not your hot take on what they were trying to say.' But then I have also seen black educators on Twitter say, 'Don't just retweet to say it is important. Show that you've invested the time to actually read and think about what we're saying.' And I think, 'Oh crap, I really don't know what to do.' Because both are legitimate arguments. And I feel I am at a place in my life where it's constantly happening to me… I've got all these voices in my head - What about this? Or what about this? I am just hoping I can come through making a decision I feel proud about and is good for people.

The process of considering different angles and perspectives before making decisions is a powerful example of Claire's efforts to disrupt whiteness and be mindful about race talk.

Analysis of Claire's Portrait

Talking with Claire Kimball was inspiring. There were many nights I pushed back from my desk and the stack of transcripts, overwhelmed but excited about the abundant, rich data in front of me. As I reviewed interview transcripts, I did not have to lean in too far or dig very deep to listen *for* a story; Claire's narrative shouted one at me - disruption!

I followed my interview guide during our discussions but marveled at how little I had to probe or rely on follow-up questions to uncover deep, philosophical thinking about race as well as specific examples about race talk in her elementary classroom. In fact, Claire provided so many interesting, insightful examples I found it difficult to select which ones to include, which helps to explain the longer excepts from our interviews that I share in this chapter. Claire takes on social justice work with a sense of urgency, embedding race talk regularly into curriculum and classroom discussions; reflecting daily on her interactions with students, colleagues, and parents; and being willing to admit, correct, and adjust wherever she lacked insight or felt conflicted. She teaches with a belief that a school's (and teacher's) commitment should extend beyond preparing students for jobs. Public school education, in her eyes, should prepare young people to be citizens of the world. Claire matches the educator description offered by Hytten (2015) in her examination of ethics and teaching for democracy and social justice:

> Educators who foreground social justice in their work argue that the central purpose of schooling is to create the habits necessary to make deep democracy a reality. This means empowering students to understand the world around them, to identify problems and their root causes, to cultivate imagination, and to

> collaborate with others in transforming societies so that all people can live full and rich lives. (p. 3)

What is education if not learning how to best function in a society with other humans?

I was also moved by Claire's sincere and honest reflections regarding her handling of specific classroom situations. Her willingness to be vulnerable allows us insight into her mindfulness. We witness her navigating unpredictable and sensitive terrain, and we see her question, second-guess, and eventually act in the most informed way possible, making mistakes sometimes. Imagine social justice education as a fulcrum. Some discussions in Claire's classroom tilt toward exploration of profound ideas. Curious young children contemplate fairness, justice, race, and power broadly, through a seven-year-old lens, as she generously facilitates conversation, respectfully recognizing their naivete and limited worldview, while reminding them that good intentions alone do not suffice. Hytten (2015) describes this type of navigation as "sympathetic attentiveness" (p. 8). "When we are sympathetically attentive, we try to understand others' (especially our students') experiences and why they believe what they believe, even when these beliefs are problematic" (p. 8).

Other times class conversations sit tenuously on the fulcrum, and Claire eventually tilts discussion the other direction, into a space of confrontation, disruption, and discomfort. If a student stands to be harmed; if comments reflect untruths that cause suffering; or if a white child responds defensively and is unable to flex his or her thinking (like the child who proclaimed all black orchestras were unfair and unnecessary), Claire will take a stand. She made it clear to me that she believes there is no neutrality in teaching, a point also supported largely in research literature (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Freire, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998). "Seeming impartiality supports dominant cultural

perspectives; it is not a position from nowhere" (Hytten, 2015, p. 3). The depth and significance of Claire's work is worth exploring, especially considering there are so few models for social justice education and explicit race talk at the elementary level, and because she engages in it so honestly and respectfully. Thinking about a future world with Claire's students in it makes me hopeful and excited.

Claire believes the role of teacher is larger than just teaching content and skills. As this portrait clearly shows, she teaches to disrupt oppression. She teaches to create inclusive environments where multiple perspectives are not only welcomed but considered a necessary part of learning. She teaches students to be critical thinkers. She teaches kindness and the humane treatment of everyone. Claire sees the act of teaching as ethical, political, economic, social, and cultural, inseparable from the realities and nuances of life. Yet when I conclude our final interview together with this observation and recap a few of her disruptive acts, she shakes her head, indicating disapproval of my characterization, immediately responding with, "But I allowed a young, black, poor, marginalized girl to be treated unfairly." Whereas I see an introspective, white teacher disrupting the status quo through asset-based, culturally responsive and inclusive practices -- traversing restrictive systems, policies, and attitudes that sometimes contradict her values and beliefs -- she often sees herself as unproductive, conflicted, and agitated that change is not happening fast enough.

If I have any critique or concern about Claire's equity journey, I fear that she often examines her fight for equity narrowly -- more often as success or failure, with little gray area. Much of that viewpoint comes from holding herself to a high, almost impossible, standard. She knows this work requires effort and resilience. She is not naive. But to remain fully engaged in the persistent fight for social justice, I urge her to

revere the gray area even more and refrain from only celebrating those instances where she feels she conquered an issue, perfected an approach, or witnessed a profound change. I hope our time together encouraged her to value more of the “small stuff” she does so well -- these small actions accumulate and have great impact in her classroom.

Claire is compassionate, resourceful, and committed to social justice education. Brimming with knowledge about anti-racist teaching, she was able to pack her narratives with an abundant amount of strategies, steps, and real-life examples. No doubt she has a strong intellectual grasp of the theoretical and practical literature around anti-racist and culturally responsive teaching. What she leaves out of her narratives is also worth contemplation. Claire appears to overlook, or possibly avoid, the most valuable resources within her reach. One step Claire never mentions as she describes her approach to anti-racist teaching is regular engagement with friends or colleagues of color when she is in doubt (possibly due to having few, if any, authentic, cross-racial relationships in her life). Her descriptions and reflections on developing racial consciousness are rooted in cognitive contemplation, work done in her head based on what she has read in books, articles, tweets, and blogs, rather than collaborative, face-to-face communal work amid people in her building, especially people of color. Her cerebral approach produces many positive results - she deserves praise for translating what she learns to curriculum and classroom instruction. She questions, ponders, and thinks, but all seemingly as a solo endeavor and not as much a part of a community working to disrupt racism. Authentic, cross-racial friendships have been elusive throughout Claire’s childhood and adult life. She identifies her racial isolation and considers it a shortcoming, certain that it influences her life experiences and her understanding of white privilege. It may also impair and limit her comprehension of just

how debilitating racism can be for people of color. Perhaps her tendency to “overthink everything” is one consequence of not being in meaningful relationships with people of color. For continued growth, developing authentic, cross-racial relationships may, as it did for her father, open her up to new, transformative thinking and mitigate some of the paralysis she describes.

Claire is reflective, mindful, and tough on herself - it is fair to call her a perfectionist. Although she may see herself as inadequate or falling short at times, overthinking to the point of paralysis, with every innovative, inclusive practice she tries: mixed ability groups, giving students multiple ways and opportunities to demonstrate understanding of content, challenging the canon, avoiding passive voice, celebrating diverse authors and scholars, introducing counternarratives, she is addressing concrete realities and creating a blueprint for what is possible. The work does not have to be perfect to have impact. Being a leader, a change agent, an effective educator involves “complicated calculus” (Minor, 2019, p. 3). Claire’s aspirations for a different future and a better world are in motion. And even slight motion, a ripple on a pond, is disruptive.

CHAPTER VI

BROOKE

Air brakes hiss loudly and unexpectedly, and I flinch. I walk hurriedly across the parking lot towards the school where children pour out of three yellow buses parked alongside the sidewalk at the entrance. This signals two things: a new school day has begun, and I am late. The groups of disembarking students converge. Once they squeeze through the school's double doors, the deluge of youngsters fan back out into the hallway. I remain caught in the tide of kids who continue to move in clumps, shoulder-to-shoulder, bumping into me with their backpacks as they turn to chat and gesture energetically. I raise my thermos of coffee and weave through the traffic. I am getting fairly close to my classroom door when a stout, bright-eyed, black male kindergartner, scanning the crowd for the nearest adult he can cajole into stopping, swats at my arm and says, "Hey, did you see my picture? It's right here. We made these yesterday, and mine's up on the wall already!" He points to his artwork within a collage of portraits that show an array of skin tones, each construction paper person holding a heart shaped piece of paper divided into sections and filled with drawn images that represent interests, talents, and loves. He summons me to check out his artwork up close and begins to describe a few things he has drawn.

As the excited kindergartener talks, I notice a few other students stopping to find their contributions, while several other children point out their finished product to their friends as they walk by. The display was inspired by Julius Lester's picture book entitled, *Let's Talk About Race,* and was brought to life by Brooke Starr, Holly Hill Elementary

School's art teacher, a favorite of the children. The collage, an eye-catching display, grows each day as K-5 classes finish their creations and Brooke adds them to the blank canvas of colorful background paper that lines a large section of wall in the main hallway. The exhibit, which shares the same name as Lester's picture book, *Let's Talk About Race*, is vibrant, direct, and personal. It suggests that talking about race in meaningful ways is important, not secretive or taboo. Selected as the common text for Holly Hill Elementary, each teacher is expected to read this picture book aloud with their students and open the floor for a discussion about race and how racial identity affects the way we view one another. Brooke's display not only reflects the diversity among the 443 children who make up Holly Hill Elementary school, it also exemplifies Ms. Starr's desire to extend conversations beyond the umbrella term, *diversity*, to focus more directly on race. The author of the picture book introduces the topic of race in a kid-friendly way. The book starts by reminding the readers and listeners that all people have a story, and that many stories have similar elements: family members, jobs they do, hobbies, nationalities, favorite foods, and religion. Then the author speaks directly to race, reminding his audience that "race is a story, too." The teachers in the building, including Brooke, have been asking their students the question, "What does Julius Lester mean by 'race is a story too?'" The group-produced collage shows one way that Ms. Starr integrates the K-5 general curriculum into her art curriculum and one of the many ways she brings attention to race. She uses the common text to help children break down assumptions and to think critically about race.

Brooke Starr has taught art for five years, four of which have occurred at Holly Hill Elementary, and she is viewed by staff members as instrumental in getting our student body engaged in thoughtful, reflective conversations about race. Brooke would

never accept full credit for the group exhibit that attracts so much pride and attention and makes teachers and parents stop to take pictures. She attributes the anti-bias, celebratory, empowering collage to many people at the school -- the Equity Team members who conduct professional development about race and bias throughout the year for the entire faculty, the Black History month committee whose members thoughtfully choose a common text each year that encourages race talk across the school, and, of course, supportive administration and teachers who open dialogue about race within individual classrooms and encourage students to notice and talk candidly about not only human similarities but also our differences, including skin color and race.

It is easy for white teachers to ignore race talk in elementary school, where notions of innocence permeate the setting and the topic of race is viewed as heavy, controversial, and more appropriate for teens and adults. I am curious to learn more about Brooke's thoughts and approaches. Brooke confirms what much of the research on race talk suggests – that many elementary school teachers eschew and silence conversations about race, possibly because the field is flooded with white teachers who struggle to navigate discomfort and prefer the safety and familiarity of the status quo. When people ignore race or divert conversations about it, it leaves big holes in what race means and how it influences students' experiences. Silence leaves young students with no choice but to fill those holes with their own assumptions and often incorrect, harmful information. Brooke wants students to be informed citizens, to think critically and accurately about identity, and to rely on multiple perspectives when they gather information and analyze people, events, prejudices, and stereotypes.

“I always try to incorporate an artist of color…”

Remembering with disdain the rehashed “dead white guys” curriculum that her teachers presented to her, even during her college level art classes, Brooke intentionally researches and exposes her students to artists of color. She consciously names the race of all of the artists as she introduces them, part of her efforts to normalize conversations around race. As she explains each artist’s techniques and shows examples of their work, it is not unusual for her or her students to uncover a connection to race. The artist’s background story, something Brooke includes in her lessons, tells children a lot about how family, lived experiences, likes/dislikes, locations, and often race, influence the artist’s decision to create art in a specific way.

Brooke describes, for example, Kehinde Wiley’s work as “a great conversation starter about race, because his work is purposefully about people of color.” An African American painter who specializes in portraiture, Wiley interrupts perceptions of power by intentionally positioning black men in recognizable poses of historically powerful white men captured in classic masterpieces (think of Napoleon crossing the Alps). According to Wiley’s studio website, his intention is to “position young black men within the field of power” (kehindewiley.com). Commissioned to paint the presidential portrait of Barack Obama, Wiley’s creation is certainly identifiable, if not radical. It contrasts greatly with the long line of presidential portraits due to another of his signature techniques, painting his subject within a backdrop of dense foliage and flowers. Wiley also chooses to center ordinary people, usually black boys and men plucked from urban city streets, within busy, bright, dense greenery and flowers, to create an incongruous contrast between a super masculine focal point and a delicate, classical art background. Wiley aims to disrupt repetitive images of black males projected within mainstream media -- depictions

of hypermasculinity, violence, and fear -- choosing to paint black men instead as beautiful, heroic, and majestic. His fusion of black culture with classic portraiture gets students' attention. According to Brooke, "Kids are intrigued and respond to his ideas."

Another modern artist of color Brooke features during her fourth-grade unit on cartooning is Ashley A. Woods. A black, female contemporary cartoonist and illustrator for a comic book series which features black, female superheroes, her art cannot be separated from race. The underlying theme in one of the comic book series she illustrates is "learning how to see past prejudices... everyone who looks different from you is not your enemy" (Jante, 2016). Brooke believes it is important for students to see artists of color at work, so she usually shows pictures or video clips of the artists demonstrating and talking about their art.

Other more traditional artists of color, such as the Gee's Bend quiltmakers, are celebrated in Brooke's art classes too. Originally a group of slave women from an isolated hamlet in Alabama that was once part of a cotton plantation, they started their quilt-making tradition out of necessity and have passed it down to ancestors who have not only kept it alive but have elevated it to prominence globally. The original Gee's Bend quilters sewed strips of cloth together to keep their children and themselves warm in their unheated slave shacks. Although elementary art teachers may occasionally include artists of color in their units of study, direct conversations about race and power are rarely documented. Brooke's mindfulness about race, equity, and social justice, compels her to do the important, disruptive work of connecting art to race and power. For Brooke, the art can do some of the heavy lifting of race talk. She finds it impossible to dismiss race, for example, from a conversation about slave women -- their isolated, minimalist backbreaking lifestyle; the white people who dictated and enforced their

enslavement; and how living as slaves influenced their functional, lively art. Brooke is intentional with her choices of artists and conversations. She skillfully uses art as a tool to challenge young learners to explore perspectives and to talk openly about the artists' materials, subjects, and the messages conveyed through their work. Brooke believes that when we give children language, an engaging curriculum, and a variety of tools to explore and discuss identities, in an atmosphere of joy, curiosity, and creativity, race is less of a taboo topic.

Throughout all of our interviews, Brooke makes her motivations clear: "I always try to incorporate an artist of color if we're learning a new medium or process." She goes to great lengths to research and center lessons on artists of various races and backgrounds, admitting that it takes some persistent digging, because artists of color do not show up as regularly in much of the traditional art curriculum. Brooke is to be commended for her persistence. She has definitely challenged and expanded the traditional canon; young students at Holly Hill are fortunate to have Brooke as a guide as they examine art through various lenses, including race. Her efforts to draw attention to race are admirable, yet somewhat ironic. During her most formative years of development, her childhood, Brooke cannot remember a time when her family talked openly and explicitly about race. I am curious about this transformation from silence about race in her family to noise about race in her classroom. I reflect on our first interview where I focused my questions on early socialization: childhood, family background, and early messages and understandings about race.

"I guess it should have come up."

Early on, Brooke indicates that her entire family is white. Her father grew up in South Carolina, in a household she describes as "very traditional." In contrast, her

mother grew up in a military family and moved around quite a bit, including some time overseas, which gave her mother's family many opportunities to interact with lots of different people. "They lived in Italy. They lived in Germany, so she [Brooke's mother], I'm guessing, had a broader worldview as she was growing up." In contrast to her more cosmopolitan maternal grandparents, Brooke remembers her paternal grandparents being very southern in the way they talked and their expressions.

> I can remember my grandparents saying kind of offhand remarks sometimes, and I'm thinking, I don't know [pause], I don't know if I want to bring up that conversation or that topic with them, because I know that they have an antiquated view of things, what would be considered unacceptable today, a less informed view... I've never had explicit conversations about race with my family.

With further probing from me about why she thinks conversations about race never came up, Brooke suggests that the most likely reason for silence was discomfort. "I guess it should have come up. I went to public schools my whole life, so I was always in a diverse setting. Yeah, we just never had an explicit conversation about it."

Later, as I probe further, Brooke realizes her public school experience was not as diverse as she imagined. She grew up in a rural area of North Carolina where there was a mix of races. Several Hispanic families lived in the area, but her actual home was surrounded mostly by white families. In grades K-2, she attended her neighborhood school where she remembers, but admittedly guesses, that the racial makeup was about "half Hispanic, maybe around 30-40% white, and the rest black." She remembers being shocked by the number of Spanish speakers in the school when she began kindergarten. A diverse student body could reasonably lead one to believe that they were members of a diverse setting, but that viewpoint becomes questionable as Brooke elaborates on her school experience. During grades K-2, she was enrolled in an

academically gifted program housed within the traditional, neighborhood school. Her description of diversity grew even more complicated when she discussed the school she later attended. From third to eighth grade, she took part in nontraditional educational programming, a gifted education program in grades 3-5 and a magnet school in grades 6-8. To participate in the gifted school program, parents had to provide their child's transportation to the school site. Brooke comments, "I think they maybe would have provided busing, but it would have been a really long bus ride." Operating again like a school within a school, Brooke guesses that the racial makeup of the students in the building, the ones not enrolled in the gifted education program, was about half white and half students of color, whereas the population of the gifted cohort was almost all white. It appears, from her description, that there was diversity within the building but a significant lack of diversity within her academic program, a trend that continues throughout her K-12 education. After fifth grade, one could argue that school segregation was firmly in place based on Brooke's recollection of her middle school magnet program.

> My sixth through eighth grade years... well, the middle school was the lowest performing school in the district, which also happened to be located in a primarily black neighborhood. So, there was our magnet program, and then there were the neighborhood kids. [Me: "All within the same physical space?"] Yes, and there was no problem telling who was in which program, which thinking back I did not register as a big problem. But now I'm thinking, how did parents not get [pause] ...I don't know.

With a hint of resignation in her voice, she continues to describe her school experience. The magnet school program ended after middle school, which meant she had to return to her neighborhood high school for grades 9-12, but her high school did not have a good reputation, so her parents entered her name into the lottery system with the hopes she could attend a different high school, "...one that had more advanced

placement (AP) courses. It was a public school; it just wasn't my districted school, but diverse, like half white, half brown and black students." The description Brooke provides about her high school and her courses shows, again, diversity in the school building but a lack of diversity within academic programs. Brooke explains:

> Kind of like today, depending on the level of the class you are in, we can predict, based on racial makeup, if it's a regular or AP class. So, I guess in a way, it [high school] felt like an extension of what I had experienced, because I went into Honors classes and AP classes, and you're just not with different groups of kids often. You're interacting with the same group a lot.

Feeling like I have a handle on the racial dimensions of Brooke's K-12 public school experience, I inquire about college.

> I went to a private, Christian college in western New York, not a very diverse atmosphere. There's a lot of international students there, so [it was] diverse in cultural backgrounds, but not diverse racially. It was much less diverse than the public schools attended.

She is absolutely correct in remembering the racial makeup of students at her college. The institution she attended is currently more than 70% white; 10% non-resident alien; and less than 5% in each of the following racial categories: Black, Asian, and Hispanic.

Seeing the pattern of tracks and segregation within her schooling, I returned to her earlier comment about never talking about race with her parents. I asked: "So this leads me back to conversations with your family about race...I find it interesting that, given the obvious racial divisions within your schools, you guys never had a conversation about it." To which Brooke replied, "Maybe we did, and it just didn't stick in my mind?"

Interspersed within our conversation about schooling and her childhood, which included a reference to three friends of color, Rashida who is Indian; Yasmine, who is

Afghan; and her best friend, Nicole, who is half Puerto Rican and remains a close friend today, Brooke remembers and describes her parents as being kind, altruistic people.

> They never explicitly said it, but they were kind of anti-racist in their actions...A lot of it has to do with the Christian ideology that was woven into our community and family; how you are supposed to love others and love those who are different from you. And it never became an explicit conversation about big racial problems in our nation or that our community had big racial problems. It just was kind of woven into it without being spoken... Both of my parents were compassionate, generous people.

Brooke's dad was a pastor during her youth and is now a superintendent of pastors, and her mother was once a music teacher who chose to stay at home with the children for several years. She credits her parents for teaching her and her brother "that different isn't bad and that we should embrace people, especially people who aren't as well off as we are." She recalls, for example, her father embracing differences, seeking interactions with Rashida's family, who practiced Hinduism. "Dad really liked to talk to them and learn more about their religion." She possibly extracted an unspoken message, beyond generosity and kindness, from her dad's invitations and dinners with Rashida's family -- to approach differences with genuine curiosity, not fear, and to seek common ground. Perhaps this approach influenced Brooke's interactions with high school acquaintances, not her closest friends and not always white.

> I remembered almost doing a little bit of code switching in how I talked to them or what I chose to talk about, grasping to find common ground or finding ways to connect...I remember it being a little uncomfortable, putting [myself] out there like that.

Brooke's recollections of code-switching point to her emerging understanding of her own whiteness.

"But I know white IS something…"

As she reflected on being white and tried to capture what it means to her, she stumbled at first, stating that being white often feels like "nowhere land." Then her eyes brightened a little, and she made a quick connection to the International Festival, an annual event at the school that she leads and coordinates.

> We were talking about this during International Festival -- inviting families to bring food from their culture or to bring some other part of their culture to school, and the question came up about people who feel they have no international culture. They don't identify with anything outside of 'American.' What do they do? What do they bring? I feel being white is a little like that. [Me: "Nondescript?"] Yes [pause], but I know white IS something -- it bestows privilege. With the privilege of being white also comes white guilt...I know white guilt is NOT supposed to be a central part of the conversation, but it is a part of me.

Brooke struggles to dismiss white guilt when she recalls times when she witnessed injustice. She is able to identify these events now, due to years of professional development and self-study about racism and whiteness, but at the time they were invisible to her, or at least not questioned and therefore ignored, due to her early socialization around white privilege. She explains an unspoken message she received about race, school, and privilege during middle school:

> In seventh grade we took this big trip to the Florida Keys, and it was just the people in our track. So that meant you had to be in the program we were in, and you had to be able to afford to pay the field trip fee. Other seventh graders weren't given the same opportunity. They could not travel out of state. I was not aware enough then to know this is happening and shouldn't be happening, but I think what I learned from it, unintentionally, was that we must have deserved the trip, because, you know, we worked harder. But I think having that at such a young age, visually seeing the difference, taught me that white people are better at school, which means they must be smarter, they get better opportunities...this is really hard for me to say...and it's something I've had to unlearn.

At the end of our conversation about childhood and schooling and the obvious tracking that occurred throughout her education, I found myself reflecting again on Brooke's revelation that race talk did not occur in her anti-racist household. She cannot recall any childhood conversations where race was mentioned explicitly, and this silence has persisted into her adulthood. When Brooke returned home for a visit, after our first interview, she asked her mother whether or not she remembered talking about race specifically, and her mother's memory was consistent with Brooke's -- race talk did not occur. Her mother could, however, recall uneasy feelings and an awkward awareness about the academic tracking within Brooke's schools, and she remembered the all-white group of PTA moms spending lots of time and energy at the school, performing many helpful roles and leading efforts to improve the school.

Once Brooke's mother confirmed the absence of race talk, I reflected on Brooke's conviction that her parents were anti-racist in their actions. In light of their daughter's participation (as well as their own) in what could easily be argued as a racially segregated educational program throughout K-12, programming that perhaps they did not entirely agree with but implicitly supported through the enrollment of their child, there is dissonance to this claim. Her assurance of anti-racist thoughts and actions seems to be rooted primarily in her father's occupation and his role as a pastor but also because "Christian ideology was woven into [their] lives." Her examples of embracing and loving others through a Christian ethics of care address oppression that is more closely connected to poverty than race. It seems likely that her family was in an ideal position to help the growing Hispanic population find a church home and feel accepted and connected, both within the church and the larger community. Christians typically believe that any work that serves the neighbor and the community, the "common good,"

also serves God. I can easily see the logic in Brooke connecting Christian ideology to anti-racism. The tenets of most major religions call for a just society, and Christian theology views all of us as children of God. It also encourages service, especially helping the poor and those in need. I gather from our conversations that Brooke has been taught explicitly about injustices like poverty and the expectation that Christians step in to help people in need. I have no doubt that her family, through the ministry and personal endeavors, have modeled honorable deeds and have offered generous support and help to people in need. This work and level of care is not to be disputed or diminished. What I find worth noting is the way Brooke assuredly chooses and uses the term, "anti-racist," to describe her parents and their lifestyle in the absence of any explicit conversations about race. Silence about race in Brooke's family would indicate that her parents, Christians who viewed themselves as morally compelled to help the poor, modeled and practiced good deeds but failed to point out any connection between poverty and race -- that poverty often results from discrimination and that discrimination is often tied to racism.

"...my students of color need more teachers of color."

Given Brooke's majority white educational experience, as a result of academic tracking within her K-12 schools, I am curious if she can remember a time in her life when she found herself in the minority, and if so, what thoughts came to mind. She immediately provided an answer.

> ...When I was in art class, actually, in high school. They didn't have Honors Art. Art class was a true slice of the school. In that situation, I felt like I was in the minority because a lot of students of color took that class, and I remember feeling slightly intimidated or shy or less outspoken. Um, but my teacher was white, so I felt I could relate to the teacher in that way... But yeah, art and PE were classes were where there wasn't a 'track' kind of thing.

Her memories of feeling shy and intimidated made me think about majority white classrooms in schools around the nation. Perhaps Brooke's feelings of shyness and intimidation, as a minority member of her art class, reflect the way our children of color feel in most classrooms: like outsiders; uncomfortable drawing attention to themselves for fear of being viewed as less smart or talented; afraid that potential missteps may be viewed as representative of their whole race. Individual white people are rarely treated as representative of the entire white race. At least Brooke was able to experience the comfort of having a white art teacher; she could at least feel a connection with her. Many black students never or rarely get the opportunity to participate in learning led by black teachers since 80-85% of America's teaching workforce is white. Our conversation about visual differences in the makeup of classes at Brooke's schools during childhood brings her to a disturbing connection. When I ask her to describe the culture at Holly Hill, she first points out positive aspects of the school environment but then admits noticing an awkward visual difference within the school building in terms of who is in which roles; one that she believes impacts perceptions and contributes to the hidden curriculum at school.

Brooke compliments Holly Hill's administrative team and the school's Equity Team for establishing a comfortable setting and culture for open and honest conversations about race among colleagues.

> I like how they describe it as everyone being on their own equity journey. Everyone's kind of in a different place, and I think they do a good job of recognizing and honoring that truth when they're addressing the whole staff.

Having an "Equity Update" scheduled for each faculty meeting keeps the staff's focus on equitable practices and exposes everyone to new learning and understanding. She also

compliments several key teacher leaders from the staff for presenting thoughtful, honest professional development about race, everything from checking personal biases to looking at in-house data on discipline referrals, but she mentions something that she noticed immediately at Holly Hill, something that disturbs her even today. “There’s a pretty distinct divide between certified and classified staff in the color of your skin, which is a little uncomfortable.” Her observation is accurate.

Certified staff are those professionals who hold a college degree in education and must complete professional development to maintain their teaching license. They are held accountable for designing and running the educational and social-emotional program within the classroom and serve students through direct teaching and assessment of mandated state and national standards. Classified staff members, also referred to as teaching assistants (TAs), may or may not have college degrees and/or a teaching license, but they are not responsible for planning or administering the academic program or assessing student achievement. They are valuable staff members who support classroom teachers and forge positive relationships with students, but they are less responsible and accountable for students’ academic success or failure. Brooke’s observations come into clarity once the racial breakdown between certified and classified staff is compared and shows a striking difference. 10 out of 19 TAs (53%) at Holly Hill are people of color versus 9 out of 39 (23%) certified teachers. This creates a visual difference in authority and expertise in the building, although this difference is counterbalanced somewhat by Holly Hill’s administrative team; both the principal and assistant principal are black. Brooke would like to see the teaching staff better match our student population, which is 50% white and 50% students of color. She would also like for equity trainings to be more inclusive; currently teacher and TA equity training occurs

separately. A group of mostly white teachers engaging in training about bias can be valuable, but the conversations are richer when the entire staff can train and talk together and share multiple perspectives. This rarely happens at Holly Hill due to conflicts in work schedules. Professional development and trainings typically occur after students dismiss, when TAs are not on the clock. The entire staff trains together just once, maybe twice, a year. Brooke identifies this separateness as an unintentional message about race, part of the hidden curriculum, which includes off-the-record learning that contributes to messages at school about who is valuable, worthy, and belongs. When parents or students enter a classroom to speak to the person in charge, they will most often interact with a white teacher. She refers to her role specifically and indicates dangers associated with white teachers appearing as authorities:

> Because of kids' narrow, immature worldview, if you have a white art teacher, it must mean that the experts on art are white people. Or, if you are white, you are more likely to BE an artist…which is not true at all if you look at the world of visual arts.

For this very reason, Brooke invited an artist-in-residence of color to teach alongside her and lead lessons during her National Boards research and submission for certification.

> One of my hypotheses is that my students of color need more teachers of color. They need better representation. I would imagine that seeing a teacher who looks like you would validate your feelings and confirm your place in the room and in the arts.

The partnership was such a positive experience, for her and her students, she is inspired and is considering ways to arrange similar partnerships in the future.

“...it’s the school to prison pipeline!”

When I ask Brooke if she can identify other unintentional or unspoken messages that pervade the school, she has several to offer. She is harshly critical of the school’s discipline policies. She feels they send negative messages to individual students as well as the population at large. She reflects on her personal experiences with discipline policies, suggesting that they contribute to children of color being viewed more often as troublemakers. School data on discipline referrals to the office confirm disproportionality in disciplinary write-ups. Teachers and administrators analyze this data at faculty meetings, and teachers engage in scenarios during which they weigh in on how they would handle the situations and determine the severity and category of the offenses. These exercises are meant to help ensure that staff members are on the same page in their reporting and that everyone takes race and bias into consideration. Teacher reactions and feedback during these exercises display variance in how adults view and classify behaviors even though the staff has engaged in deep conversations around the role race may play in judgement.

Brooke is equally critical of one of the most popular interventions for students showing at-risk behavior. Known as Check-In/Check-Out (CICO), this research-based behavior intervention is designed to link at-risk students to at least one positive adult who checks in on specific behavior targets and helps the student track his/her success with targets daily. Brooke, however, notices that a disproportionate number of students of color are recommended and participate in CICO, which she believes creates a stigma around the program. “It can kind of train your brain to think that the students doing CICO have certain issues, that they are not normal.” This messaging can extend to other students as well. At a glance, white children may conclude that kids of color struggle with

and need help controlling behavior. Plus, she thinks there is a danger in students of color internalizing a sense of not fitting in. “I think if you are the ones in CICO, you internalize the message that you are not normal; you are *ab*normal, and we need to deal with this by doing this clunky thing.” Given the opportunity, Brooke would like to scrap the entire discipline policy as it exists today and replace it with something more transformative, like restorative practices, an approach the entire Holly Hill staff was trained in during the course of the year. Restorative approaches are designed to respond to challenging behavior by focusing on mediation and agreement rather than punishment. Through authentic dialogue guided by trained teachers, restorative practices enable the students who have been harmed to convey to the person responsible, through individual and community discourse, the impact of the harm. Responsible parties then take steps to make it right. It is a disciplinary strategy that, if done consistently and appropriately, builds self-awareness, accountability, social awareness, and self-management. The staff received training in restorative practices, but it conflicts with the current, more punitive discipline system established at school and thus has not been fully implemented. Brooke has strong opinions about the current system:

> ...the whole discipline referral thing criminalizes a lot of normal childhood behavior…The form is awful. I think the communication with parents is clunky, negative, and awful... it’s the school to prison pipeline! Why can’t we record data about a student without an office referral? I hate it!... It is stuff like this that perpetuates racism, systemic racism. There has to be something way better than what we have now. It is my least favorite part of school.

Brooke is on a roll with examples of unintentional messages about race:

> The unintentional messaging is powerful. And I think that’s the whole premise of systemic racism, right? It’s not necessarily an individual, or an individual might

> not think that they are racist, but they can be part of a racist system...One person can make a difference, but it's the system that needs to be disrupted.

Still shaking her head about the discipline policy, she provides another very specific example of the hidden curriculum in school, an event outside of classroom instruction that sends a message about talent and success at Holly Hill. The national Parent Teacher Association (PTA) sponsors a visual arts contest annually. Brooke welcomes the celebration of art and recognition of talent. In fact, many students who find academic recognition challenging and elusive excel in the arts and deserve recognition. "It gives them an opportunity to shine in places and in ways they don't necessarily get to in the regular classroom." However, the way the competition plays out, the advantage tilts towards privileged children, often those students who are white, wealthy, and not the most talented visual artists. Advertised as an optional contest open to all students, Brooke points out that certain things must be in place to participate successfully. Students must have art supplies at home and time and space to work on their art; a parent/guardian must fill out and submit entry forms; and artwork has to be transported to the gallery where it is displayed. Brooke is asked to play a part in the recognition ceremony, and she resents feeling forced to feign pride and happiness about a program that she thinks is inequitable. She tells me that her spreadsheet of entries shows that just two students of color participated this year, and that is because she solicited the support of the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). Together, she and MSAN volunteers supported interested minority students by offering time, space, and supplies for participation. Documentation shows that typically white, wealthier students win the contest each year. Because there is local and district press, as well as official

recognition within the school, students receive the unspoken message that the more talented artists, the ones who deserve praise, are white.

"Students have a misunderstanding of what 'racist' means."

Brooke has clearly indicated examples of the hidden curriculum at school as well as her frustration about feeling stuck in the system where routines, policies, and procedures are entrenched. I ask her to shift focus and describe intentional messages about race. She has acknowledged that the school does a good job of creating space for staff conversations about race and racism, so now I ask, [How do YOU do that? Lead intentional conversations and explorations at school?] Brooke pauses briefly before responding.

> Well, I'm pretty straightforward and honest with my students when we start learning more about art history...I'll explicitly state when we are learning about an artist of color: 'I think it's important that we don't just learn about artists that look a certain way...in many art classes you'll see a lot of old white men, but it's important to me that we learn about artists of different races and genders and backgrounds'...They respond well to that...and I've learned it's not as hard as I originally thought it would be. The kids are more receptive to talking about race if they feel I'm being really honest.

She also likes the common texts selected each year to generate whole-school conversations. When she can collaborate with colleagues and take time to plan and prepare lessons, scenarios, and questions, she enters race talk with greater confidence. She admits feeling more nervous about the impromptu conversations that can arise during a class period. "I'm anxious that I won't convey the appropriate message to the students involved, one they can take away and apply to other situations." Sometimes she feels forced to shut down conversations and move past events quickly due to time constraints, which is anxiety-inducing because "...it feels like a sweep-it-under-the-rug kind of thing." She prefers, when students misuse or misunderstand the label, *racist*, to

address the issue directly and immediately, but she sees students one time a week for thirty minutes. If the incident occurs at the end of class or during a transition, it is difficult to find the time to return to the students or talk it all the way through to resolution. I ask her how race issues surface during the school day and what impromptu conversations sound like. She tells me that situations usually center around a student accusing another student of being racist. “I most often hear controversy over skin color representation with paint. A student will see a choice another student makes, react dramatically to it, and then the label gets thrown out -- ‘That’s racist!’” Brooke sees and hears this kind of thing more often with older students at school, more commonly in grades 3-5.

> Not too long ago I witnessed a student drawing a Yin Yang symbol as part of something he was working on, and another student was like, ‘That’s racist!’ And the student who said that was Chinese, and the student who drew the Yin Yang was not Chinese. I don’t entirely know the history of the symbol and have always understood it to mean balance… Much like the reactions to paint colors for skin, I think saying, ‘That’s racist,’ is a dramatic way for students to point out someone else pointing out race. And pointing out race is not racist. Students have a misunderstanding of what ‘racist’ means. I see them using the term to get a reaction.

Because misconceptions around the concept, *racist*, come up frequently, at least once a week, Brooke teamed up with a colleague, someone she considers knowledgeable about race and equity, to get advice on a response she could use to address the confusion and misuse of language. Brooke tells me that, in the past, she used to react to such statements by saying something along the lines of, “Let’s not say that.” She would quickly redirect the conversation to dodge any further discussion on the topic. But now she responds with direct eye contact and this explicit line:

> When something is racist, it is important to call it out, because that’s a serious thing. But we also do not want to use the term lightly. An instance like this is NOT an example of racism, and if we need to talk further about it we can.

According to Brooke, this direct confrontation works. For students who know they engaged in name-calling to simply get attention or solicit a reaction from a classmate, the conversation rarely needs to go further. If, however, she perceives that the situation needs more time and clarification, she gives it more time and attention and draws from some of her equity strategies, which may include a one-on-one conversation or, if the incident warrants, referring back to the common text or restorative practices training to address the issue with the whole class.

As she talks about strategies, another example comes to her mind. She credits the Equity Team with teaching her the *checking biases* strategy. Using a real-life example as a backdrop, she explains how it works.

> I had this situation where one student colored all over another student's hand out of anger, and I was questioning if I should write this up as a discipline referral because the student had a history of lashing out. So, I went to my colleague to engage in the checking biases exercise. We ask ourselves questions like, 'What if instead of THESE two students, it was THIS student and THIS student?' You can change the race of the student or sometimes the gender. If we do that and find ourselves saying, 'No, I wouldn't write that up. It's really just developmentally appropriate behavior -- just part of being a child,' then I don't. Switching it up helps you look at the situation in a new way -- plus [sigh], you know how I hate how those discipline referrals anyways -- how they tend to criminalize a lot of normal childhood behaviors. But I find that exercise really helpful when making decisions.

As we continue to talk, Brooke shares a number of examples of how race comes up regularly in the school.

"It might be the code I speak…"

Besides the weekly accusations of, "That's racist!" Brooke says another time she is very aware of race at school is when she is filling out report card grades.

> Going through and giving grades and looking at whose work is on grade level and whose work is not -- it makes me hyper aware of where my teaching has

> been lacking, because it seems like a lot of my students of color are more likely to be a 2 than a 3.

At Holly Hill, students are graded on a scale of 1-4, with 3 being the mark of proficiency. A grade of 2 indicates below standard performance, and a 1 is considered far below standard. A score of 4 indicates performance that exceeds expectations for grade level work.

> I have qualms about giving grades at all for Art. I have to think about all these things: What is their background? How can I support them better?... Is it a code-switching type thing? It might be the code I speak -- my white background and how I grew up, my education and culture [pause]. I find myself having to repeat a lot of directions to my students of color. And it's either because they weren't paying attention, which could mean I wasn't engaging enough, or they didn't understand the way I said it, which means I have to say it in a different way. Um, so they end up getting a lot of attention for needing extra assistance. I am always wondering why this is such a frequent pattern? What could I do to change that?

Unlike a lot of teachers, who quickly and easily identify problems within the classroom and just as quickly blame students or their families for those problems (thinking and saying such things as: *They don't listen; Parents don't monitor homework; They're lazy!*), Brooke is able to reflect constructively and consider a variety of possibilities, including her potential role in those problems. This thoughtful reflection is a testimony to her mindfulness. She is to be commended for experimenting with different, solutions-driven approaches; thoughtfully expanding the canon; and for planning responses to correct misconceptions about race, although she acknowledges that social justice is not a canned curriculum or a script. Remaining flexible is critical, and Brooke believes this is where consistent equity training comes in handy. If she relied strictly on her instincts when handling race issues, ones that are rooted in whiteness, and could not draw from understandings and strategies learned through her equity training, she would increase

the risk of interacting insensitively with a student or making assumptions that would damage or block progress. She has an acute awareness of ways that her whiteness influences her perceptions, made obvious in her confessions about trying to create new habits of mind. She knows the importance of challenging her own socialization history and unlearning some assumptions about race and prejudice that have become ingrained, and I am impressed that she can provide so many specific ways she is trying to break old, and once invisible, habits.

Analysis of Brooke's Portrait

The examples Brooke shares about race issues and how they emerge at her elementary school; her willingness to be vulnerable and engage in honest reflections about the ways she navigates race issues; and the analysis embedded in the portrait so far provides a window into her mindfulness. As I listened *for* a story in Brooke's narratives about her family background, her own educational path, and her professional training and experience as an educator, a story emerged that illuminates a competent, caring, and connected teacher but one whose life experiences and positionality socialized her into certain understandings about race and influenced her ability to conceptualize her family's own white complicity in racist systems. Three in-depth interviews with Brooke, along with informal observations of her during the school day and a four-year collegial relationship, makes me confident in saying that Brooke successfully connects to learners of all backgrounds and that attending art class at Holly Hill improves the educational experience of all students. Brooke has created a space where children feel inspired, heard, and valued, which makes them want to learn. I plan with many teachers and visit many classrooms within the school and frequently hear teachers express concern and frustration about student motivation. Motivation is not an

issue in Ms. Starr's art class. Students enter the door almost in a trot, unable to tame the impulse to ask as they enter, "What are we doing today, Ms. Starr?!"

The array of the culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogical strategies Brooke uses to connect to students is comprehensive and exemplifies mindfulness: 1) incorporating artists of color into the curriculum to ensure that students of color see themselves in art and as artists; 2) disrupting whiteness by examining the culture of power explicitly with her students; 3) creating a respectful environment where students and their cultures and backgrounds are validated and misconceptions about race are addressed, and 4) broadening student perspectives regarding authority and knowledge about art by recruiting a teacher of color to share expertise and lead art classes. Brooke is actively disrupting and transforming the conditions that create and reinforce privilege. She advocates discussing race and challenging the status quo during elementary years because,

> It is when everything is forming. [Me: "Yes, and if you aren't talking about these problems with young students -- race, injustice, discrimination -- you're ultimately choosing a side, the side of status quo. That's not a neutral position"]. Right. Not doing something is doing something.

And Brooke feels morally compelled to do something. The problem of racism is big, but she sees her role as teacher as a doorway into disrupting it, "I know [racism] exists; that it's wrong; and I know I am in a position to work on it."

Identities, for all of us, are multiple. Brooke identifies as a white female; an anti-racist educator; a Christian; someone from the rural South; part of a working-class family, who sacrificed and lived modestly on a pastor's salary; and more. A salient piece of the interview sequence, for me, was Brooke's competing discourses around identity. The literature on race and identity confirms that identities intersect and are situated

(Borsheim-Black, 2018). Because they are multiple and layered, and the salience of different aspects of identity advance or retreat depending on the situation, identities can sometimes contradict one another. Occasionally I see contradictions in Brooke's narratives about moral responsibility and anti-racist actions.

Brooke alludes several times to a moral responsibility to eliminate racism, a position influenced by her identity as a Christian. Her parents taught and modeled Christian principles. She states outright that racism is morally wrong, implying that it rejects and contradicts Christian ideology. She also provides many examples of how racism permeates our schools and negatively impacts students of color: through disciplinary practices and policies; Eurocentric curriculum that ignores contributions of marginalized groups of people; and grading practices, to name a few. Brooke is not a loud, animated person, but she calls out white privilege emphatically during our conversations, expressing distaste for the way it tilts advantage, for example, towards wealthy, white students in the annual PTA sponsored art competition and unfairly depicts students of color as troublemakers due to inadequate and unfair disciplinary policies adopted by schools. Brooke is comfortable making these observations within her workplace and readily implicates social institutions and resistant individuals in replicating racist practices, but she shows reticence in naming her own family as participants in racist practices, even when I prompt her to say more about her racially segregated academic programs in grades K-12. She admits not giving the situation much thought back then, a benefit of whiteness, but some ambiguous language, non-verbal cues, and changes in her tone of voice as we talk makes me think this may be the first time she has entertained the idea that she and her family bear some responsibility for the racist

practices she so readily condemns, like the inequitable academic tracking structure that characterized her K-12 education.

As self-reflective and aware as she is about race, injustice, and her current role as an educator, conversation with Brooke about her parents gets caught in a loop of sorts. She obviously comprehends them to be morally upstanding, generous, compassionate people. This view, however, seemingly prevents her from seeing them as complicit in racism, choosing instead to view them through a Christian identity lens that positions them as good, moral people who are part of the solution. She does not explicitly say it but implies, through her statement that Christian ideology was woven into their lives, that anti-racism is a natural byproduct of the Christian faith, so much so that, in her family, it required no direct conversation. She just knew her parents were anti-racist because their actions were such. There is little doubt that her family talked about poverty and the moral obligation to help the poor, but Brooke cannot explain the absence of race in family conversations. Her references to Christian ideology intimate that a Christian life places Christians (her parents) on the right side of morality automatically and without the need to interrogate further. I reference this point earlier in the portrait, and I feel I need to emphasize it again. I have no first-hand knowledge of Brooke's parents' work in the ministry. My exploration of a theme (i.e.: moral responsibility possibly camouflaging white complicity in racism), is not an attempt to diminish or disregard their commitment and good work in the community. Brooke's description of her parents and her childhood compel me to explore two things: 1) how socialization histories deeply affect the construction and maintenance of race consciousness -- they shape our thinking and influence rationalizations even into adulthood, and 2) how white people tend to restrict racism to individual intention,

obscuring the collective harm good people unintentionally participate in by simply following accepted rules in society (Applebaum, 2005). Moral, good people reproduce and maintain racist practices, and I think Brooke struggles to admit the possibility of this in her own life. I can relate. I have struggled myself in recognizing and admitting racist practices, attitudes, and complicity within my own family, but Brooke is tasked with confronting the additional, emotionally-charged fact that her dad is a pastor and, as leader of a church, is generally held to higher moral and ethical standards. Hearing me question her parents' silence about race and their decisions to enroll her in "tracked" academic courses appears to make Brooke uncomfortable at times. Brooke, astute and unequivocal in identifying institutionalized racism and naming unjust practices at her workplace, seems hesitant to connect oppressive, racist actions to her good, moral, anti-racist parents. Brooke categorizes her school situation as unfortunate and sad. Moreover, she admits that the privilege she experienced, especially the educational opportunities she took advantage of, leads to generational, accumulated wealth for white people while disadvantaging people of color. This awareness is important; however, it seems meaningful that she struggles to implicate her parents and upbringing in the reproduction of systemic forms of racism.

There is more than adequate proof that white people experience difficulty talking about race and accepting their complicity in racism (Applebaum, 2005; Applebaum, 2007; DiAngelo, 2018). Applebaum (2007) makes an observation that may help explain some of Brooke's difficulty in seeing her parents' complicity and realizing that individual actions by good people can obscure systemic injustice: "White people perform and sustain whiteness continuously, often without conscious intent, often by doing nothing out of the ordinary" (p. 456). It is challenging to critique a culturally sanctioned position of

goodness -- a pastor and pastor's wife, instruments of God's teachings. Conceding her parents' complicity in racist, oppressive acts would not only be painful for Brooke, but disorienting too. While advocating for the best education for their daughter, which resulted in driving the distance to attend magnet schools, paying for out-of-state field trips, and taking advantage of the school lottery system that afforded her greater access to college preparatory courses, it would appear that they were doing nothing out of the ordinary. However, these choices and outcomes, as innocent as they may seem, helped reproduce racist practices. Moral responsibility, something Brooke proclaims as motivation for dismantling racism, requires Brooke to "[Ask] questions about what is presumed to be normal" (Applebaum, 2007, p. 465). I believe my interviews with Brooke prompted her to scrutinize her family's decisions for the first time. I am curious what other revelations our conversations, and this portrait, might open up for her.

Impressed with Brooke -- her deep reflection; her willingness to explore and question preconceived understandings about race; her obvious efforts to transform pedagogy; her genuine concern about whiteness in schools and the hidden curriculum; the way she rejects the deficit lens and mitigates the racist effects of schooling for students of color -- I had to refrain from concluding that Brooke, who is undeniably successful at being a culturally responsive educator, had nearly completed her equity journey. It was tempting at times to think this way, but review of interview transcripts kept pulling me towards Applebaum's (2007) work on moral responsibility. "If white people keep whiteness focused on awareness rather than complicity, they fail to notice and bear responsibility for their collective role in replicating and sustaining unjust practices" (p. 454). Even though Brooke has experienced significant success and recognition as an equity leader and an effective teacher in the building, it would be irresponsible for me to

suggest that Brooke had “arrived.” Brooke still has work to do. She can recognize and articulate how she has benefited from white privilege but struggles to identify how her family contributed to systemic racial injustice through collective harm achieved through segregated schooling. This is a stumbling block along Brooke’s journey, a place where she gets a little bogged down. “Recognizing that one is complicit is a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition of challenging systemic racial oppression… Failure to acknowledge such complicity will thwart whites in their efforts to dismantle unjust racial systems (Applebaum, 2010, p. 3). This is the reality of a white person developing race consciousness and learning to evaluate outcomes, responses, and decisions through an equity lens. Race consciousness is a destination to which white people never fully arrive. Most white people are so accustomed to belonging racially within a society rooted in white supremacy that they do not have to think about race; belonging is internalized and reinforced. Therefore, white people will always be in the process of unlearning, disrupting, recognizing racist patterns, and moving past defensiveness and guilt to action. If I had to identify an area of growth for Brooke, it would be broadening her concept of racial injustice to include complicity. She recognizes it on a large scale, societally, but does not apply the concept more narrowly to her own family.

Brooke, too, has a sense that she has work to do, although she identifies a different focus. She voluntarily describes what she believes is her weakness, something that holds her back on her equity journey -- a lack of authentic relationships with people of color – even in spite of my viewing her as more of a collaborator than her peers. She interacts with people of color infrequently. Her interactions with people of color at work feel positive, but...

> Having more and better relationships with friends and families of color, like personal, going-over-for-dinner kinds of relationships, would help me. Because when you try to picture someone's life outside of the school setting, you have no choice but to guess. I mean, what do their conversations sound like? What are they having for dinner? What issues are they talking about?...I think having more diverse friends would give me greater and more accurate insight.

Without authentic connections, Brooke tells me, "You don't know what you don't know. Without forming genuine relationships with people of color, you have no choice but to work off of assumptions." Brooke is aware of this obstacle and has begun the self-analysis needed to move forward. This admission shows that Brooke is not willing to be complacent; she rejects a false sense of satisfaction that her curriculum work alone is enough. She understands that her work can, and needs to, extend beyond the school building if she wishes to follow her moral motives to eliminate racism and transform the larger power structure. She has not yet moved significantly in that direction; but she works to build collaborative learning partnerships with people of color. She may feel stuck at the classroom door for now (Picower, 2012), but at least she resists what many successful white teachers cannot -- being lulled into thinking that her current work suffices. Even though Brooke demonstrates social responsibility at school, through CRSP, participation in equity trainings, and other leadership roles, actions that are impressive and impactful, she sits in the discomfort of knowing she has more to do. She recognizes that her actions at school do not get her off the hook for further, more expansive, action. I am eager to see what this competent, caring, connected teacher does next.

CHAPTER VII

SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

Curious and concerned about inequities in schools as well as challenges and successes associated with disrupting racial bias, I began this study eager to examine an underreported subject -- white teachers navigating race in elementary schools. Understanding how race issues arise at elementary schools and how white teachers perceive and handle them is important because teachers (and schools) shape students' understandings about race, racism, and racial identity through both spoken and unspoken means. I began my inquiry with a focus on teachers and conclude with a discussion on school context. An explanation for this route of discussion will become clear in this final chapter, where I present a summary of the investigation, reflect on implications, and draw some conclusions, even recognizing that there is no end to the process of unlearning racism and creating more equitable and just social relationships.

Much of the research literature around social justice education and antiracist practices invokes white teacher tropes: the resistant teacher, the colorblind teacher, the fragile teacher, the white savior teacher, and the innocently ignorant teacher. There are fewer studies that have sufficiently examined nuanced understandings about race exhibited by "mindful" white teachers who are trying to make whiteness more visible for analysis and learning. Many researchers focus on pre-service teachers as universities endeavor to prepare future teachers (mostly white, middle class females) to implement culturally responsive practices and connect with a diverse student body. The research has less to say about in-service teachers - their needs over time and how their school

community supports them (or does not). As for context, most of the research around race talk reveals ways that it plays out in middle school, high school, and university settings, but research that explores one of the most inhibited and silent settings for race talk, the elementary classroom, is limited. My research study on mindful, white, in-service teachers navigating race in elementary classrooms helps fill these gaps.

Public schools are critical locations to engage in the cultivation of democracy; however, given public schools' legacy of exclusion, differential access to quality education, and significant racial disparities in achievement between students of color and white students, it is urgently important to investigate our schools and the people who work there more closely. If we are to believe and trust that public schools work for the common good by providing equitable opportunities to learn, then we cannot ignore the racial achievement gap, nor the people who have the most potential to connect with students and develop supportive, meaningful, empowering relationships -- teachers. If we fail to examine the white teacher's mindset, we run the risk of perpetuating white privilege and preserving racial hierarchies in schools. Knowing that white teachers can exercise their privilege and avoid racial issues by pursuing status quo education, I was interested in learning what helped mindful white teachers see the significance of race. What motivated them to advance their understanding, and what strategies did they use to engage young students in conversations about race? Mindful white teachers, through their vulnerability and willingness to self-reflect, can give us unique insight into the potential that "mindfulness" related to equity, anti-racism, and social justice, generates for dismantling racism. The results of this study, shared through three teacher portraits, illustrate a variety of lived challenges and successes associated with mindful white teachers' efforts to confront and disrupt racism.

Typically perceived as locations of innocence, there is silence around race in most elementary schools. Many white elementary teachers have been socialized to believe that talking about race is impolite, uncomfortable, invites friction, and is therefore inappropriate for young children. Learning from mindful teachers who work within typically silent settings is important in a study about the navigation of race, because they know the truth -- that whether we talk about it or not, children arrive at conclusions about race, often misguided and inaccurate ones, communicated through both the overt and the hidden curriculum. Mindful teachers also know that racism is pervasive in schools and impedes relationship-building and equitable education. These teachers want to be instruments of change. They see race talk as a necessary component of teaching, learning, and democratic citizenship.

Answering Research Questions

The main research question and sub-questions that guided this research study were:

1. How do white elementary school teachers navigate race issues in the classroom?
    a. How do perceptions and understandings about race, particularly whiteness, develop and influence their work?
    b. How and when do opportunities for race talk arise during the school day?
    c. What strategies do they employ when opportunities for race talk emerge?

Three theoretical frames helped me identify, name, and explain particular patterns and phenomena related to white teachers' development of racial consciousness and how their perceptions about race influence decision-making in the classroom: critical race

theory (CRT), critical whiteness studies (CWS), and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy (CRSP).

Several tenets of CRT helped frame my thinking as I conducted this study: 1) racism is pervasive and perceived as normal; 2) whites have little incentive to eradicate racism since they benefit from their position at the top of social hierarchy; and 3) minority voices should be heard because their counternarratives help reveal the experiences of people of color and their marginalization. CWS helped me interrogate white privilege because it shifts the focus of race away from black and brown "others" and instead problematizes whiteness, an invisible, hierarchical identity construct that privileges white people. CWS attempts to destabilize the construct of whiteness and calls for white people to acknowledge their privilege, admit complicity in racism, and strive for justice. CRSP is premised on the idea that culture is central to student learning. Over the last decade CRSP has become more and more a part of teacher training programs and professional development. CRSP includes a variety of student-centered instructional approaches that push teachers to abandon deficit thinking, dispose of their own cultural biases, and genuinely recognize and value students' backgrounds as a way to build a supportive school community and increase achievement.

1. How Do White Elementary School Teachers Navigate Race Issues in the Classroom?

Interview transcript data, as well as the portraits of white teachers that I crafted from this data, reveals that although the teachers in this study teach different grade levels and different curricular content, common themes exist in their navigation of race. All three of the classroom teachers have a clear understanding of what it takes to be a critical teacher, and they navigate race purposefully and conscientiously, understanding

that it is valuable but messy work and that they will not be perfect at it. They work hard to recognize and understand their whiteness and the role it plays in their personal lives and at school, although they struggle with particular elements of their early racial socialization and inevitable limitations that come from seeing and experiencing the world from a position of dominance and belonging, as a white person, and not a person of color.

Two of the three teachers in the study, Allison and Brooke, feel most comfortable navigating race collaboratively, within their school setting, citing both the impact of experienced passionate colleagues leading professional development and the benefits of exploring and exchanging ideas with colleagues familiar with the school culture. One of the three teachers, Claire, a veteran teacher, has been invested in equity work longer and feels more confident about it due to her graduate school coursework in a social justice related program and years of experience as an educator. When navigating race, she often approaches it academically, defaulting to “in the head work” of reading articles, books, blogs, and tweets. Her engagement with other people in conversations around racial consciousness often extends beyond school grounds to a larger and more distant virtual professional network. After grappling with race related topics and concepts cerebrally, she takes advantage of the time delay that virtual interaction provides to think deeply before she responds within her online professional community.

Whether they lean towards a collaborative or academic approach to navigating race, all three teachers make genuine attempts to apply what they learn to their work with young children with the purpose of transforming the current conditions of education. They see themselves as change agents, feel a responsibility to advocate for social justice, and are determined to navigate race in such a way that they disrupt whiteness,

expose injustices, and engage young children in explicit race talk. They work to encourage children, even as young as kindergarteners, to think critically about inequities and to empower them to change current conditions. Race is not a taboo topic in their classrooms.

However, the ways in which the three teachers I studied navigate race is not without missteps, misinterpretations, and regrets. Each portrait reveals times, places, and situations where they doubt, hesitate, or question their responses to race-related incidents. How they process mistakes and proceed with antiracist, culturally responsive practices after experiencing discomfort or doubt can potentially guide both teacher educators and educational leaders in developing coursework, designing professional development for in-service teachers, creating mentoring programs or other supports for both new and experienced teachers, and making space for reflection and conversation about race and racism.

How Do Perceptions and Understandings About Race, Particularly Whiteness, Develop and Influence Their Work?

I collected information about participants' racial identity and construction during Interview #1, when the teachers delved into their personal backgrounds. I was interested in learning more about how these mindful teachers developed an understanding of the concept of race and how/when they began to see themselves as racialized human beings. Perceptions and understandings about race were developed early in the teachers' lives, during childhood, and were heavily influenced by their families, public school, and community. However, the ability to understand and name whiteness came later for these women.

Allison, Claire, and Brooke are members of white families, grew up in white communities, and attended majority white schools. They confess that race was never explicitly talked about in their homes, for a variety of reasons, including these unspoken but understood beliefs within their family units: 1) good, polite white people do not talk about race -- noticing and talking about race makes you racist; 2) Christians have a moral obligation to be anti-racist; it is a natural part of Christian faith and is often reflected through good deeds; and 3) a white context (neighborhoods, schools, social circles) gives white people little to say about race; since race belongs to black and brown people, racism is “their” issue. These three teachers, who grew up feeling detached from the idea of race (it was something “other” people had), reported that their worlds were turned upside down when their socialization histories were challenged and they learned the truth -- that race belongs to white people too, that with whiteness comes unearned advantage that influences opportunities and shapes outcomes (historically as well as today), and that white people (including themselves) use that advantage, consciously and subconsciously, to perpetuate white power at the expense of people of color. These new understandings, obtained later in their lives either through higher education, professional development, or both, contradicted their childhood messages and proved difficult to rectify, a fact they expressed during interviews. Denial is a potent force. It is often easier and safer to believe messages communicated by important adults, but each of these mindful teachers now recognize how unproductive and dangerous denial is and are willing to explore cognitive and emotional dissonance that accompanies new understandings about race. Most importantly, they insist on exposing the racial lies that kept them safe and comfortable throughout school, untruths that continue to keep white students safe and comfortable today, oppress people of color, and perpetuate inequities

in schools. All three teachers challenge their socialization histories, and despite some struggles, are trying to change the educational landscape.

Reflecting on their own K-12 education, all three teachers shared that their schools communicated powerful messages to them about race and reinforced the notion of white superiority. Two teachers in the study highlighted the fact that they attended schools where the general student body was diverse, but upon further probing, they realized that systems and procedures such as tracked classes resulted in a clear racial divide. According to the teachers' recollections, white students participated in college prep classes, extravagant field trips, and a curriculum that emphasized creative, conceptual work with a focus on self-management. In contrast, students of color were enrolled in lower level classes that featured less creativity and opportunity; did not participate in expensive, long distance field trips; and needed more teacher oversight because they seemed to routinely cause trouble. These differences communicated a message that white students were better at school, could handle and be trusted with extra responsibility, and needed less oversight.

White teachers were clearly the authority figures at their schools. Claire struggled to recall the presence of any teachers of color during her K-12 experience, whereas Allison and Brooke could only name one or two. They feel confident in their recollections that race talk did not occur at school other than quick reviews of familiar topics during Black History month: slavery, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and the Civil Rights movement. These subjects, atrocities, people, and contributions were taught through their teachers' white lens. Although some college coursework and professional trainings have made these teachers aware of race and white privilege in their own lives, socialization histories root deeply into the subconscious and prove difficult to untangle.

As mindful teachers, Allison, Claire, and Brooke are actively engaged in the gradual and complicated process of changing consciousness by unlearning habits of mind. Their intentional work to disrupt mind*less* adherence to norms and practices that reinforce white mainstream culture is often disorienting, unsteady, time-consuming, and marked with mistakes. But as change agents, they reflect and open themselves up to criticism and learn from their mistakes. They disrupt the status quo by teaching with race in mind. They aim to build student capacity in their classrooms by viewing each student through an asset-based lens and creating space where teachers and students respectfully work together, talk openly, and learn from each other.

How and When Do Opportunities for Race Talk Arise During the School Day?

Race is omnipresent within schools. From the parking lot to the classroom to the cafeteria to the playground, race is always in play. So, for the question about WHEN opportunities arise for race talk, an honest answer would be, anytime. White teachers have the luxury of avoiding conflict and discomfort by simply teaching "the way it has always been done," remaining quiet about race. But mindful teachers question status quo education. They exhibit the courage to talk explicitly about race and seize opportunities to connect it to students' lives.

The teachers in my study indicate that although race talk may be appropriate in any location at school, they feel most able to engage students in it constructively during classroom lessons and discussions, because they are in control of planning the content and shaping the conversation. Given time to think and plan, they can decide just the right place to insert a thought-provoking question, a counternarrative, an example of injustice, or a celebration of a contribution by a person of color. They can also anticipate and carefully plan how to group students for activities, how to differentiate lessons to

ensure access to content, choose the best resources for projects, and guide some of the discoveries. But race talk cannot always be planned. Sometimes issues arise that require an on-the-spot response or reaction.

Unplanned race talk causes more anxiety, according to the teachers in my study. During interviews, all three teachers expressed fear of misinterpreting situations, saying the wrong thing, responding in a way that is perceived as insensitive or unhelpful, or being unintentionally disrespectful during impromptu race-related interactions. They do not always trust their race-talk repertoires or their limited experience with facilitating conversations involving sensitive topics. Even so, they see unplanned race talk as unavoidable, something they need to practice, and an integral part of the process of disrupting whiteness. They navigate the discomfort they feel by utilizing techniques learned at their professional development sessions; reflecting on their responses after race-related events, making corrections and adjustments where needed; and by seeking opinions and feedback through collaborative exchanges with colleagues.

What Strategies Do They Employ When Opportunities for Race Talk Emerge?

Although mindful and skilled at culturally responsive and sustaining practices (CRSP), the navigation tactics of these three teachers do not entail a cookie cutter approach. They are complex and contextual. For example, Brooke cites her use of a collaborative “checking biases” technique when she questions herself about classroom discipline. Claire references the need to create space for exploration and conversations about race, but she also believes that at times, when seven-year-old thinking veers into illogical territory, she has to take a stand and clearly come down on one side of an issue. Although sensitive and caring, she believes discomfort has to be a part of the young white student’s experience when engaged in race talk, just like it is with white adults.

Allison knows that race talk can be difficult, so she turns to high quality children's literature to do some of the heavy lifting of race talk for her. She seeks books, poems, and short stories that can provide counternarratives, frames of reference, and useful language for whole group discussions. There is no manual for CRSP, but all three teachers excel in these skills: 1) seeing typically marginalized students through an asset-based lens, which helps all students develop cultural competence, 2) developing a sense of student agency and ownership by communicating worthiness and high expectations for all students within a positive, engaging environment, and 3) fostering critical perspectives that challenge inequitable social structures. All three teachers are active, reflective learners themselves. They make astute observations about their students and create powerful bonds with students and families, but also nonetheless realize they have much more work to do. All three realize that more authentic, personal, and lived relationships with people of color would be an important asset to them in their ever-growing race-consciousness, even as they struggle to manifest this reality.

Discussion – So What?

The field of education abounds with promises and commitments to challenge inequities. School leaders and educators who attempt to introduce and lead equity reforms in an institutional context where whiteness is deeply ingrained confront numerous barriers, one of which is making whiteness visible to their predominantly white, middle-class workforce. Making the invisible visible is a major challenge because white people typically fail to see themselves as having race, experience fragility when pushed to examine their whiteness and privilege (DiAngelo, 2018), and struggle to see their school as a setting where racist practices are reinforced. Growing teachers' racial awareness - engaging them in critical self-reflection and building understandings about

the unearned benefits of whiteness and the pervasiveness of whiteness in school culture -- is a logical starting point for creating shifts in school culture. A genuine commitment to antiracist teaching requires educators first to comprehend why it is needed. White teachers must learn the foundations of race, especially understanding that white is a race and that whiteness matters, before doing the work of dismantling racism. The teachers in my study disclose, however, that too often equity work gets bogged down at the “awareness” stage. In the Rockwell Heights district, teachers report that they learn and relearn introductory content which explains what whiteness is, how it accrues privilege and status, and the devastating effects of whiteness on students of color. Indecisive about how to sequence equity trainings and differentiate offerings and experiences to meet the needs of all teachers, school leaders have, so far, kept the introductory story/lesson on a continuous loop and have missed opportunities to go deeper. Two of the three teachers in the study fear that if efforts to disrupt whiteness hover at the awareness level, it may actually hinder real structural change, especially as participants in these trainings grow tired of what they perceive as more of the same and frustrated with what they see as the lack of clear direction and strategies for application. Dismantling racism is difficult work, and awareness alone will not adequately disrupt patterns of whiteness and create equitable schools.

As I mentioned previously, research studies that focus on white teachers working with diverse groups of students tell us much more, unfortunately, about failure (unaware or resistant teachers in denial) than they do about reflective mindful teachers energized to pursue difficult race conversations (Castagno, 2008; Galman, Pica-Smith, & Roseberger, 2010; Picower, 2008; Segall & Garrett, 2013). White teachers are not a monolithic group. They represent a wide range of views and degrees of mindfulness.

What happens when teachers are prepared, committed, and ready to move beyond racial awareness to advance their practice? Examining introspective, mindful teachers who are ready to experience risk and tension can illuminate some of the thinking and strategies teachers *should* use to connect to students. Such an examination can also provide school leaders with some ideas about next steps -- they can glean insight on possible new experiences, trainings, and exposures that can help mindful teachers build on their understandings and expand their advocacy skills, both inside and outside the classroom. The candid comments and insightful reflections of three mindful teachers may also help school leaders critique their current policies and procedures to determine whether or not they facilitate or interfere with teachers implementing social justice education.

Equally important to this study of mindful white teachers is the unique school context in which they work. The Rockwell Heights district, through its Equity Plan and required professional development, explicitly names the damaging effects of racism, promotes the disruption of whiteness, values race talk, and provides an overview of CRSP for all teachers employed there. Supportive school contexts are rarely mentioned in the research. More often social justice educators report school context as one of the barriers to race talk. Much could be learned from further studies of teachers in similarly supportive contexts, and from deeper investigation at the school or district level.

Key Findings and Implications

Through a comparative analysis across all three portraits, I identified four key findings, which I describe below. Some of the key findings align with the larger body of research on antiracist teaching and social justice education, but other findings deviate

from patterns described in research. These deviations provide readers with new insights but also invite new questions about developing and supporting mindful white teachers.

Socialization History is Powerful

Research reveals that, for most white teachers, their lived experiences typically have a greater impact on their pedagogy than does professional training (Johnson, 2013; Miller, 2017; Nash et al., 2017; Nash & Miller, 2014; Picower, 2009). When the teachers in this study reflected on their racial socialization, their recollections included family interactions, social observations, and schooling, and aligned with general research findings that suggest that a substantial part of "becoming raced" happens unconsciously (Buchanan, 2015; Johnson, 2002; Miller, 2017; Picower, 2009; Shim, 2018; Ullucci, 2011). Neither of the three teachers could recall any explicit talk about race in their homes, yet they confessed knowing something about race (that it belonged to black and brown people) and that they should not talk about it. As these teachers tried to make sense of their world as children, they turned to their families, schools, and communities and developed a general (though at the time inchoate) conclusion that white people were important, smart, deserving, and better off than people of color. By simply watching and comparing, these teachers constructed a racial hierarchy early in their lives, and they internalized that they were members of the top rung.

White families tend to adopt a socialization approach that appears egalitarian. While it is important to note that obscene, overt racism is still taught and modeled by some parents, many white parents have adopted what Bonilla-Silva (2018) calls "New Racism." A covert form of discrimination, just as contemptible as overt racism practiced during the Jim Crow era, New Racism is "more sophisticated and subtle" (p. 17). Bonilla-Silva refers to New Racism as "smiling discrimination" (p. 51) because whites who

participate in it can appear nice, reasonable, even moral as they wield it to downplay race, oppress people of color, and maintain their position in the social hierarchy. Whites who adopt New Racism often utilize a colorblind frame of thinking and subscribe to the belief that race does not matter anymore, a sentiment that all three teachers in this study found familiar based on their childhood upbringing and the subtle and overt messages they received in their homes. Even though colorblindness misrepresents reality by implying that race is insignificant and a thing of the past, this frame has been normalized and accepted in society because white people, the dominant racial group in the United States, endorse it. Most white parents see race as irrelevant in their lives and therefore find it unnecessary to discuss with their children. By avoiding and silencing race talk, white parents communicate to their children that race is a taboo topic. This was the experience of Allison, Claire, and Brooke. By living primarily segregated lives in white-dominated neighborhoods, schools, and society where race was a taboo topic, these mindful white teachers concede that they grew up ill-informed about race, unprepared to think about it critically, oblivious to their privilege, and unaware of the damaging effects of whiteness on people of color. Working in a district committed to equity, alongside higher education and personal learning commitments, helped the teachers in this study to begin to understand the impact of their socialization histories and to write new racial scripts.

Research shows us that socialization histories follow most white teachers into their classrooms, and they unknowingly replicate deeply ingrained habits from childhood, a problematic move in the classroom resulting in silence around race topics. “By privileging white comfort over opportunities to interrupt racism, we [fail] not only to advocate for students of color but also to model what it means to be an educator and a

white ally" (Galman, Pica-Smith, & Rosenberger, 2010, p. 233). From the interview transcripts and portraits, one can see that the three teachers in my study differ from resistant white teachers described in the majority of the research. They are willing to interrogate their socialization histories. They are not, however, flawless in this exercise. They labor and stumble as they try to unlearn intuitive, deeply-rooted habits of mind. It is fair to describe their conceptualization of racial identity as "in process"; however, they do illustrate sophisticated knowledge and skills and successfully cross racial boundaries. They demonstrate what Crowley (2016) defines as "transgressive thinking" (p. 1019). This means they have the ability and desire to extend themselves, intellectually, beyond their socialized racial knowledge, which helps them combat deficit thinking about students of color, and "[refuse] to claim ignorance about the functioning of race and Whiteness" (p. 1022). Although they "get" racism conceptually, can analyze race on an intellectual level, and attempt to apply what they learn to instruction, they stutter-step and experience complications when pushed to consider their own complicity in racist practices, or their family's complicity. Socialized to keep themselves safe from implications of racism, Allison, Claire, and Brooke, like the white teachers in Crowley's study (2016), use distancing strategies to "negotiate" their own complicity in racism.

For example, Allison's desire for acceptance and comfort while in the presence of her white rural friend group, who displayed overt racism, competed with her intellectual comprehension of racism. As she defended her friends' innocence, she negotiated her complicity in racist practices rather than confronting it. Claire, well-versed on topics of race and racism, exhibits discursive moves to evade face-to-face contact and direct conversations with colleagues of color when she questions her racial decision-making, choosing instead to engage in distanced relationships with online professional groups

who are less familiar with her and disconnected from school culture. Her preference for tidy, controlled, distanced conversations about race -- ones she can lean in and out of at will -- keep her safer than messy, unpredictable, authentic interactions with people of color in her work space. Brooke, the daughter of a pastor, was quick to categorize racism as immoral. When probed, however, about her family's decision to enroll her in an academically gifted program that created a visible racial divide in the school and inequitable opportunities for students, she struggles to implicate her parents in racist practices. As Crowley (2016) describes, "complicity [is] a complex intellectual and emotional terrain" (p. 1027), and even mindful, caring, reflective teachers struggle with it, perhaps, in part, because there is no way out of complicity. Rather, we can learn how to navigate it differently so as to hopefully open up new possibilities. The teachers in my study navigate troubling and uncomfortable facets of their white racial knowledge by often negotiating rather than confronting particular aspects of their socialization and racial understanding, a move that helps them remain comfortable and safe by obscuring their complicity.

Race Talk CAN Be Done With Young Children

Another key finding from my study, and one that aligns with limited research on elementary aged children, is that young children can handle and productively engage in race talk. Race talk with older students gets much more attention by researchers, but several studies demonstrate that young learners are open to it and are capable of thinking critically about race (Berchini, 2016; Bolgatz, 2005a; Bolgatz, 2005b; Castagno, 2008; Hawkman, 2018; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). The three teachers in my study, through their own personal exploration of racial identity and CRSP, have witnessed its positive impact, especially on marginalized students. They concur that productive, high

quality race talk can happen, if done mindfully. Too many teachers, especially elementary teachers, convince themselves that they are “doing equity” and respectfully celebrating differences when they engage in superficial forms of multiculturalism, ones that focus more on food, costumes, music, and art than on root causes of racism. Providing lessons and materials about people outside the dominant culture can arguably diversify curriculum, but the consequences outweigh the benefits when this is not done mindfully. White culture is usually not part of the celebration, which positions white culture as the norm. “Celebrating” non-dominant groups of people outside the context of everyday curriculum further defines these groups as “the other” and may actually promote stereotypes. Plus, students may comprehend information about non-dominant groups as extra information instead of core knowledge that contributes to an overall understanding of the world and its history.

It is enticing to carry out lessons that simply promote harmony and pride in heritage, but mindful teachers understand the trappings of superficial multiculturalism and opt instead for challenging, honest, often uncomfortable conversations about race to empower children to think critically about the world and to foster agency to change current conditions. In each of the three teacher portraits, I provide specific examples of ways these teachers engage students in high quality race talk and ensure that marginalized children see themselves positively - in the school, in the curriculum, and in the larger world. Once we hear rich examples of culturally responsive and sustaining practices such as: Allison’s use of mentor texts to facilitate conversations about racism with her students; Claire’s intentional efforts to expose passive language used to protect white people’s innocence; and Brooke’s decision to teach students about Kehinde Wiley’s art and his explicit efforts to disrupt repetitive, negative images of black males

projected within mainstream media, we arrive at an important conclusion. Young children can be taught to engage in challenging conversations about race, and they are capable of using sophisticated critical analysis to identify injustices and the need to create change. Elementary school teachers can no longer excuse their evasion of race talk by proclaiming that young curious minds are too fragile. Too often it is the white adult mind that is fragile.

School Context Plays a Prominent Role in Motivation and Action

Supportive school context has received little attention in the larger body of research on social justice education, perhaps because it is uncommon. The school in which this study occurred, Holly Hill Elementary, is part of a district that, for more than ten years, has supported and offered a variety of equity training for staff members, some of it led by nationally acclaimed scholars and trainers with social justice expertise. Trainings have also been designed in-house with the aim to teach the history of racism in America and its impact on society, including the institution of education, and to encourage teachers to disrupt the status quo. Guided by the district's Equity Plan, district administrators advocate for race talk in classrooms, give teachers freedom when it comes to designing unit content and instruction, and expect teachers to use culturally responsive instructional strategies to ensure that all students' needs are met. Hearing from teachers who pursue social justice work within such a unique context can provide invaluable information.

All three teachers in my study expressed gratitude for being part of a school system and a school that shares some of the responsibility for implementing and supporting antiracist teaching. Each teacher referred to their supportive school setting as a major factor in their intentionality of action, citing specific examples as underpinning for

their persistence and investment in challenging the canon, encouraging race talk, and implementing CRSP. These examples include 1) a district Equity Plan, 2) a required district training about the history of racism, 3) Equity Teams at each school, 4) equity updates at monthly faculty meetings, 5) on-site professional development led by staff members, which includes conversations about CRSP, 6) freedom to design and alter curriculum, and 7) a safe space to question race dynamics and admit struggles. These insights influenced me to foreground school context in this final chapter. Hearing from these mindful teachers who are grappling honestly with the reality of racism as they learn how to unpack their whiteness, provides school leaders and fellow educators important conceptual, contextual, pedagogical, and curricular information that can inform continued teaching and learning about race, racism, whiteness in schools.

Having taught in other schools where race was rarely mentioned, if at all, two of the three teachers expressed concern about the type of educator they would have become had they remained in these environments where race was ignored or addressed superficially. The same two teachers expressed appreciation for the school focus on equity and the in-house professional development provided by colleagues. Consistent with my view of her as a collaborator, Brooke commented,

> Because it [addressing and disrupting racism] is a priority for our school, I feel like it is more of a priority for me. It helps to be tackling the problem WITH people. I don't know if I would have been aware enough or brave enough to trailblaze alone at my old school.

Brooke and Allison claim that without consistent, explicit support from their school colleagues, regular equity updates at staff meetings, and the creation of a safe space to ask questions and share struggles, their approach to curriculum planning and instruction would inadequately address race and resemble the status quo. Claire, a twenty-year

veteran teacher who, prior to working at Holly Hill worked as a Head Start educator in an urban community with a large Latinx population, claims to have been experimenting with CRSP for many years. Her graduate school studies introduced her to intersectionality between race, class, and gender and prepared her to be a critical educator early in her career. She recognizes and appreciates, however, the district's and the school's efforts to keep race centered in conversations and teaching practices.

The testimonies of these three teachers show that supportive settings can expand teacher potential, however, it is important to mention that social justice education does not unfold at Holly Hill without problems and missteps. A couple of teachers in the study alluded to contradictions between the district's message about equity and existing school policies. They were particularly vocal about their frustration regarding discipline policies. Being trained in restorative practices, a positive and healthy approach to conflict, and a method that they feel has the potential to be transformative for the student body as a whole, was exciting for them. During required training, district administrators and staff delivered the message that teachers needed to embrace restorative practices and implement them in their classrooms, yet all of the disciplinary policies stayed the same. According to Claire, "If teachers are required to change, then policies and procedures must change too, or none of it fits together." She resented learning about restorative practices only to return to her campus and receive a refresher session on adhering to the discipline referral process -- how to categorize and code infractions on the same old form and "write up the minutia of being a kid in the world." All three teachers were also critical of privileged parents undermining efforts to enact equitable practices and administrators caving in to their demands. Creating a formal Equity Plan that encourages the interrogation of whiteness with the aim of empowering all learners

and closing the achievement gap is laudable; however, the Rockwell Heights district and individual schools have much more work to do to ensure the plan's integrity and enactment with fidelity.

When we hear mindful teachers credit their school community as a major factor in their growth in racial awareness, implications are obvious. Universities should not be the only institutions shouldering the task of educating teachers on the importance of race consciousness. Isolated college courses that touch on social justice and culturally responsive practices will not gain traction unless school districts ensure continuity and deepen reflection and conversation through differentiated professional development on race, racism, and CRSP. These teachers' accounts demonstrate that, when immersed in a professional community pursuing equity, the power of the collective (especially a collective that includes teachers of color) is meaningful in creating conceptual shifts. Tackling issues of race WITH a group of people keeps race centered in conversations, bolsters teacher confidence, and will more likely lead teachers to see reasons why we need to talk explicitly about race and disrupt whiteness. It also ensures that all staff are responsible for this work, including and perhaps especially white teachers.

Mindful Teachers Do Not Necessarily Fit the Bridge-Builder Profile

Research literature documents numerous accounts of white teachers who resist antiracist pedagogy (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Castagno, 2008; Miller, 2017; Segall & Garrett, 2013). I was motivated, however, to study white teachers who successfully connect, or build bridges, with students of color, because I believe we can learn much more about how to improve education by examining their transformative potential -- their motivations and successes, as well as their blindspots and struggles.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, white teachers who are able to cross racial boundaries and develop positive respectful relationships with students of color serve as "bridge-builders." I referenced to a few studies on bridge-builders in my literature review (Harding, 2005; Johnson, 2002; Miller, 2017; Ullucci, 2011), but they are not abundant in the research. However, because they are lauded for their potential to best disrupt racism, I found it compelling to assess whether the teachers in my study fit a bridge-builder type mold. According to the research, bridge-builders attribute their success with marginalized students to two factors: 1) first-hand knowledge of people of color, and 2) perceived marginalization.

One of the teachers in my study, Allison, similar to the bridge-builders, mentions both first-hand knowledge of people of color (black and Latino friends in middle school, high school, and college) and perceived marginalization (a member of a single-parent household) as important factors in her racial development. As I outlined in her portrait, Allison describes close relationships with people of color and how she witnessed offensive acts of injustice imposed by white people on those same friends. But, interestingly, she follows that anecdote with another story, one that illustrates the grip of white supremacy and her unsteady racial consciousness. Her instinctive engagement in white solidarity (DiAngelo, 2018) to protect her white friends who display overt racism, deviates from general research findings on mindful, antiracist teachers. Bridge-builder research confirms, and logic may suggest, that close, personal, equal status relationships with people of color broaden a white person's understanding of racism and injustice. Whereas bridge-builder teachers credit their personal relationships with people of color as a means to building empathy and a factor that influences their decision to explicitly examine the culture of power with students, Allison's decision-making, although

marked with successes in the classroom, gets stuck at the classroom door. She reveals an emerging, ever-evolving racial consciousness, one that remains rooted in whiteness, evidenced in some of her decision-making outside of her professional environment and away from colleagues.

The other two teachers in my study never allude to first-hand knowledge or perceived marginalization as factors in their mindfulness or their success with CRSP. In stark contrast to the Bridge-Builders, they do NOT see pieces of themselves in their marginalized students. In fact, Claire's socialization story and description of her lived experiences contrasts greatly to the bridge-builder profile illuminated in the research literature. She admits having few personal interactions with people of color until graduate school and no authentic relationships with anyone from another race, even today. A heterogenous, able-bodied female from a white, affluent, nuclear family in the suburbs, Claire does not identify with any facet of perceived marginalization described in other studies, yet she demonstrates bridge-builder characteristics. Brooke, too, is unable to cite first-hand knowledge or perceived marginalization as factors that influence her thinking; however, she is able to recognize her power as a white teacher and make pedagogic decisions that address race and power as she builds a supportive, inclusive community within her art classroom.

So, what do we make of this? Two of the mindful teachers in my study successfully cross racial barriers and connect with students of color, but they do NOT establish those connections in the same way bridge-builders describe -- across personal experiences or through perceived marginalization. These observations invite some interesting questions. Knowing that bridge-builders are a rare bunch, the big questions for me are: What do we do with the majority of white teachers entering the profession

who are unable to draw from perceived marginalization or first-hand knowledge? How do we help them build bridges with marginalized students? Without first-hand knowledge and perceived marginalization, how do we move the majority of white teachers towards mindfulness? Additionally, how might white teachers develop more meaningful relationships outside of their primarily white worlds?

If more white teachers fall into the resistant/unsuccessful trope than the Bridge-Builder profile, and 80-85% of the teaching workforce is white, it is safe to assume that most white teachers are not creating spaces for young students to critically examine race. One clear answer to the question: *Without first-hand knowledge and perceived marginalization, how do we move the majority of white teachers towards mindfulness,* comes from the mindful teachers in this study. School leaders and district officials, as well as administrators at individual schools, must take an active role in creating spaces for race talk and provide consistent, high-quality professional development focused on race, racism, and the disruption of whiteness. A school environment that cultivates democratic learning, invests in a long-range Equity Plan, acknowledges and embraces the messy work of race talk, and supports teachers in the process of developing new perspectives on race is more likely to move resistant or unaware teachers towards mindfulness than a school district that avoids this work.

Recommendations for Practice

I began this study hoping to discover how mindful white teachers engage in race talk in elementary schools. I was also intrigued by how they became interested in race. I wanted to know what factors led them to reflection, self-critique, and a willingness to try new instructional methods. Learning what motivated them to become introspective and resolute in their pursuit of social justice education could be useful for other teachers and

school leaders. Based on the reflections and stories of the three mindful teachers in this study, I make the following recommendations:

1. Engage the school system as a whole in racial equity transformation efforts. Entire staffs, administrative teams, school boards, and central-office department leaders must commit in order for structural change to take shape, and for teachers to be supported and able to take risks. The teachers in this study attest to the power of the collective. All three teachers highlighted the usefulness of assignments or activities at school that required cross-racial conversations. Working as a collective help them to build foundational understanding, a shared vocabulary, and increases the chances that race talk will occur in the building.
2. Create a space where teachers can engage in explicit race talk and process difficult, messy conversations. White teachers are not likely to create safe spaces for race talk in their classrooms until they too can experience being vulnerable and supported in safe spaces. Race talk pushes emotional hot buttons, so establishing norms for conversations will help facilitate productive discourse. Four useful norms from the Courageous Conversations Race Protocol (Singleton, 2015) can provide a starting point: a. Stay engaged, b. Experience discomfort, c. Speak your truth, and d. Expect and accept non-closure (p. 70).
3. Invest in ongoing, differentiated professional development and time for reflection. One criticism mentioned by the teachers in this study targeted their administration's indecisiveness -- school leaders getting stuck in an "awareness loop." School leaders must create opportunities for teachers to go deeper in their race studies. Differentiated professional development could include equity

coaching, mentoring partnerships, workshops, book studies, or revising units of study to include diverse characters, counternarratives, and social justice topics.

4. Align policies and procedures with equitable practices. Forcing new methods and practices into old frameworks creates confusion and shuts down teacher motivation. It also communicates that the school, or district, is all talk and no action.

Recommendations for Future Research

Focusing attention on mindful white elementary educators unpacking and navigating race within a setting that is typically silent on race talk revealed important information about mindful teachers as well as the impact of school context on racial identity development. Additional studies on similar topics can provide us further resources for this important work. I base the following recommendations on my engagements with the three teachers and my findings from this study.

Research on white teachers navigating race should extend beyond the two most frequently reported groups of teachers: 1) resistant white teachers (either in denial or ignorant about race) and 2) teachers who successfully cross racial barriers and connect because they fit the “bridge-builder” category, a noteworthy but sparsely identified group that I describe in detail in Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter. Situated somewhere within the gap of resistance and bridge-builders, sit potential mindful teachers capable of reflection and self-critique. More research needs to be conducted on teachers outside of the two most common teacher profiles to uncover strategies and experiences that can potentially move resistant and racially unaware white teachers closer to mindfulness.

Because the three teachers in this study identify their school context as a major factor in their racial development, more research needs to be done on teaching contexts.

Contexts shape how we think, what we say, and what we do. It is clear from this study that race talk can be done with elementary students. Further research on critical conversations with early learners can provide guidance for best practices. It is also clear that immersion in a professional culture that encourages race talk within safe spaces increases white teachers' confidence to take risks and disrupt status quo education. Current research does not yet show a complete picture of equity-centered school districts engaged in whole-district equity efforts. It would be beneficial to study the effects of district Equity Plans -- the impact that district messages and support systems have on teachers' attitudes and practices as well as marginalized students' experiences with schooling.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This research was meant to advance our understanding of mindful white elementary school teachers and the intellectual and emotional work they engage in to unpack race. As with any research process, I encountered several limitations while conducting this portrait study, several of which I described in chapter 3, including sample size and unique school context, as well as the likelihood of my subjectivities shaping the creation of portraits. Another researcher's perspectives would have yielded different results. One strength of this project is its focus on mindful educators. The small number of teachers examined allowed me to investigate their experiences in depth. The fact that I knew these teachers, some better than others, through several years of work in the school also allowed me to create even richer portraits; I was able to complement interview data with reflections from my observations of them in the school and in their classrooms. So much of what we know about white teachers, documented in the research literature, suggests that they assume positions of resistance or ignorance

around racial identity, both intuitively and actively, and they devalue the impact of racism on education. Addressing root problems associated with pervasive racism in our educational system is more probable if we pay close attention to what mindful teachers do. We learn a lot when we study how they challenge deeply rooted, subconscious, socialized understandings about whiteness as they advance their understandings about race, racism, and CRSP. The data I collected and shared through written portraits can help researchers, educators, administrators, even legislators, better understand the urgent need to address race issues at the institutional level, however, it must be noted that the small sample size and the unique school context limits the generalizability of these results.

Another limitation of this study is that it was conducted by a white researcher with white teachers. As I mentioned in chapter 3, my white skin could possibly be considered a strength – it gave me access to insider conversations and commentaries about whiteness – but overall, the data I gathered and my interpretations of the results provide a very singular, white perspective. Feeling obligated to be as objective as possible, I am sure subjectivities influenced my writing. Future research should include people of color engaging in similar investigations.

Final Reflections

The process of examining the equity journeys of three accomplished, mindful educators engaged in critical self-reflection and grappling with racial identity, compelled me to consider my own personal and educational journey thus far, especially in relation to race consciousness and social justice work. As knowledgeable and skilled as these three teachers are in equitable practices, they admit that being an ally is a place of struggle for them, a role with which they seek clarity - an identified area for future

growth. As I take account of where I am now on my equity journey and where I have been, the most significant change in my recent racial development (as a result of my doctoral coursework and research, school-based trainings, and cross racial conversations) can be pinned down to greater clarity around advocacy and alliances. I do not wish to insinuate that I have perfected the role of ally, but I now know that it is clearly different than simply being supportive. Being an ally can be an effective (and necessary) way to use privilege to combat racism. At one time in my life, I patted myself on the back for my ability to show an alliance with someone without the same privilege, but I now understand that I was often simply showing support. There is a difference between passive support and active engagement, and I am trying to be more cognizant of my actions both inside and outside the classroom.

A few days ago, I reflected on my efforts (and imperfect growth) to confront racism through strong allyship. I walked past a fourth-grade classroom and remembered a long-term substitute (sub) teacher who worked there a year prior, while covering a maternity leave. Ms. Gara (pseudonym), a woman of Indian heritage, exhibited indisputable professionalism. She exceeded expectations of a long-term sub. She attended grade level meetings, asked pertinent questions, sought help when she did not understand procedures, and consistently delivered the lessons created by the team with a kind and gentle demeanor. Because instructional coaches lend support to long-term subs by modeling lessons and conferring about instructional practices, I can attest that Ms. Gara was, in comparison to long-term subs hired in the past, one of the most reliable and committed subs we had on our roster.

About three weeks into the school year, the principal (who was new to our district) shared with me that several white parents were asking about Ms. Gara's

credentials. Later, the same group of parents lodged a complaint about Ms. Gara's performance. They targeted her quiet voice and her accent as the major problem. They requested an opportunity to observe Ms. Gara teach during the school day - a request encased in white privilege. I considered my responsibility as an ally, recognizing that, in the past, I would have most likely reacted to a situation like this in one of two ways: 1) I would have stayed silent, allowing administration deal with it, or 2) I would have expressed my sympathy directly to Ms. Gara for the bullying she was receiving, without a commitment to stand publicly for or with her. New knowledge about whiteness and the importance of allies, gained over time, initiated deep reflection. I did care about Ms. Gara, and I wanted to help her. But being an ally is about more than helping. According to Dr. Frances Kendall (2013), consultant on organizational change, allying with someone

> is about working with them and using our privilege, power, and access to influence and to change the systems that keep people oppressed… This is not about rescuing or grandstanding or making a show of our support so that we will look good or progressive…. (p. 180)

I realized during a conversation with the school principal that I was ready to confront the group of white parents at a meeting he scheduled. I was able to understand, at that point in my equity journey, that my commitment to stand up for Ms. Gara was not just about taking care of the "other." A mindful approach to the situation helped me understand that defending her could not be treated as an act of charity for an individual. This was an essential understanding. While white parents pushing for her departure was not good for the targeted individual teacher, it was equally damaging to the institution of education. Also, if the alliance was to be taken seriously, I could not realistically expect to feel comfortable during a confrontation with a group of white parents. The process of

breaking allegiance with the people who had the same privileges as I required risk and discomfort. The benefits of an inclusive environment far outweighed my comfort and emotional safety. Loss became gain. The status quo was challenged, and Ms. Gara stayed. No grand finale ensued but voices were heard, dominant as well as marginalized voices. One small instance felt significant in the pursuit of systemic change.

I shared in Chapter 3 that I enjoy the process of making art. The thrill of choosing a method like portraiture, much like the process of making a quilt, was being able to both discover and actively create meaning throughout the project. Sometimes the swatches of cloth (data) felt chaotic, scattered, and disconnected, requiring more analysis. Other times a single scrap of a story took on a life of its own and became a focal point from which a block of the quilt was constructed. Often, I crafted several individual blocks before a clear quilt pattern emerged. As I finish this research project, similar to finishing a quilt, I find myself instinctively pulling back and breathing in deeply before taking a final, critical inventory of my method and artistry. As I consider the cohesive, whole piece - its design, color palette, “voice,” and its scale - I notice that some swatches of stories, although different in shades and tones, blend together in a pleasing way, while other stories, zinger swatches, present something unexpected but interesting, a pop of color that adds dimension and grabs attention, inviting the eye to linger longer.

Most quilters feel their quilts are incomplete until they attach a frame, a simple fabric border that serves as the visual stopping point for the roaming eye. It was tempting to entertain images of a social justice frame or an equity border to signal the completion of this research project. But the stories shared by Allison, Claire, and Brooke, mindful teachers at different points in their equity journeys, along with my own experiences with racial identity, lead me to resist that notion. To the displeasure of

quilters all around the world, I leave this quilted narrative without a border to symbolize that the equity journey never ends. There is no neat and tidy equity frame, no stopping point where we celebrate arrival or completion. Our learning is complex, varied, and continuous.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview #1:

Purpose: Get to know the teacher's background - uncover how/if she sees herself as racialized

1. I want to start by talking about your family.
    - Are your parents the same race as you...as each other? What about extended family?

2. What ideas did your parents grow up with regarding race? Do you know?
    - Have you talked about race with your parents?

3. What lessons or messages do you think you learned about race from your family?
    - Any contradictions? Saying one thing but doing another?
    - How important is your race to you?

4. Let's focus on your childhood
    - Where did you grow up?
    - What was the racial makeup of the neighborhood in which you grew up?

5. What about your school experience (elementary, middle, high, college)?
    - What was the racial makeup of your school(s)?
    - Did you have any teachers of color? If so, how many? How do you remember that teacher (or those teachers)?
    - Think about curriculum at your schools - What people of color did you hear about?

6. How many friends of color did you have as a young person?
    - If you had friends of color, how would you describe those friendships?

7. When was the first time you noticed race - that there are different races and that you are white?
    - What did being white mean to you, looking back?
    - Have you experienced white privilege?

8. Describe a time when ...
    - you **witnessed** an injustice (unfairness, abuse) or a conflict based on race

- race impacted you personally

9. Describe a time in your life when you felt like or realized that you were in the minority? When/Where were you? What thoughts did you have?

10. Thanks for spending time with me. Is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation before we wrap up?

Interview #2:

Purpose: To learn about how and when "race talk" arises in the elementary school setting

Opening:
How long have you been teaching at _____ school?
How would you describe the culture here regarding race relations?

1. Many researchers contend that school is a place where race is constructed. Describe when you are most aware of race at school?
(This can be a time of year, time of day, a location, lessons, meetings, etc.)

2. Race can be constructed through both unintentional and intentional messaging.
   a) Let's start with unintentional messaging -- and this is tricky because unintentional messaging happens due to lack of awareness. As a teacher who is mindful about race, think back on and describe a couple of interactions, decisions, or conversations at school that you believe may have <u>unintentionally</u> conveyed a message about race.

- What was the context?
- Outcome?
- (Instances can include interactions with students, parents, colleagues, or curriculum, data).

   b) Now think about intentional or explicit messaging.

      How do you lead intentional conversations and explorations about race?
- In what contexts?
- How often?
- Outcome?
- Should race be discussed more or less in your classroom?

3. What **feelings** do you experience when you lead or engage in conversations about race at school?

- With students?
- With colleagues?

4. What messages about race (unintentional or intentional) do you think are communicated to…

- **White students** in your classroom now? (Examples)
- **Students of color**? (Examples)

5. Can you describe times when you were **proactive** about racialized conversations/teaching?

- What was your process for preparation?
- Any hesitations/anticipation?
- Which resources were the most helpful?

6. Now describe a moment when you didn't have the luxury of time -- when you had to be **reactive** to a racialized conversation?

7. What types of race talk or racialized conversations have your overheard students having amongst themselves?

- What did you do when you heard them?
- Do you wish you would have done anything differently?

8. What or who drives or sets the tone for race talk in the building?

- What types of things, in your opinion, advance the conversation?
- What types of things constrain the conversation?

9. What role do you think the school district's Equity Plan plays in race talk at your school?

- Do you think conversations may be different if the Equity Plan did not exist?

10. What impact do you think more open and frequent conversations about race would have on:

- Students of color
- White students
- Staff of color
- White staff

11. Thanks for spending time with me. Is there anything else about the school setting or context that you would like to add before we wrap up today's interview?

Interview #3:

Purpose: Focus on the participant's role as teacher and the strategies she uses to manage race talk or other race issues at school. Questions target training and classroom practices.

1. What influenced your decision to become a teacher? What do you find most rewarding?

2. What grade level do you teach now? Have you taught other grade levels; if so, which ones? What is your favorite age group and/or subject to teach, and why?

3. What is the racial makeup of your school/class?

4. How do you think your racial identity (being white) influences what you do in the classroom?

5. What experiences/trainings have you had that prepare you to teach students of color?
- If they mention the required equity course, ask: How has your approach to race and conversations about race changed since completing the course?
- How would you describe your commitment to practices and ideas related to equitable education? What influences your commitment when it's so easy to stick to status quo?

6. On a scale of 1-10, how prepared do you feel to teach students of color in your classroom?
- What makes you feel this way?
- What would move you closer to a 10?

7. What are some examples of teaching practices you use to address race in your classroom?
- Talk about ways that you decide what to teach, how to teach, and/or whom to teach about.
    - Can you provide examples of people of color who are taught through your curriculum?
    - How do you generate ideas to alter curriculum and/or address race during instruction?
    - Where do you turn to get guidance or resources to help you teach diverse students?
    - What obstacles are there? What do you find helpful?

8. Let's talk about addressing race directly in the classroom:

- How would you compare your approach today to 4-5 years ago?
- What role should schools play in teaching about race, justice, equality?

9. Every teacher in our district has to take a foundational course on race and racism. What other training would be helpful? What do you feel is missing in your trainings so far?

10. Is there anything else about classroom practices or PD that you would like to add?